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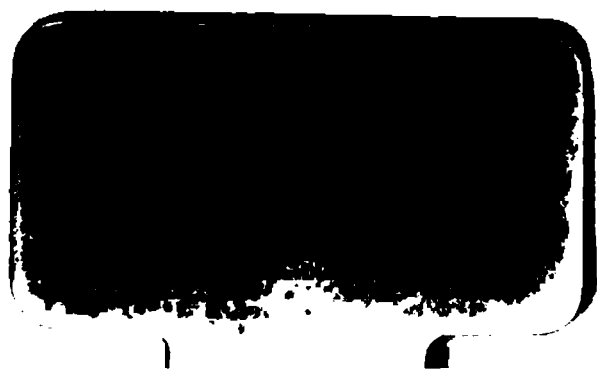
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FORTUNE'S FAVOURITE.

FORTUNE'S FAVOURITE.

BY

EMMA JANE WORBOISE,

*Author of "Esther Wynne," "Warleigh's Trust," "The Story of Penelope,"
"The Abbey Mill," "Robert Wreford's Daughter," &c., &c.*

"All is not lost.

The warm noon ends in frost,
And worldly tongues of promise,
Like sheep-bells, die off from us,
On the desert hills cloud-crossed :
Yet through the silence shall
Pierce the death-angel's call,
And 'Come up hither,' recover all."

"And friends, dear friends, when it shall be
That this low breath is gone from me,
And round my bier ye come to weep,
Let One, most loving of you all,
Say, 'Not a tear must o'er her fall !
He giveth His belovèd sleep !'"

MRS. BARRETT BROWNING.

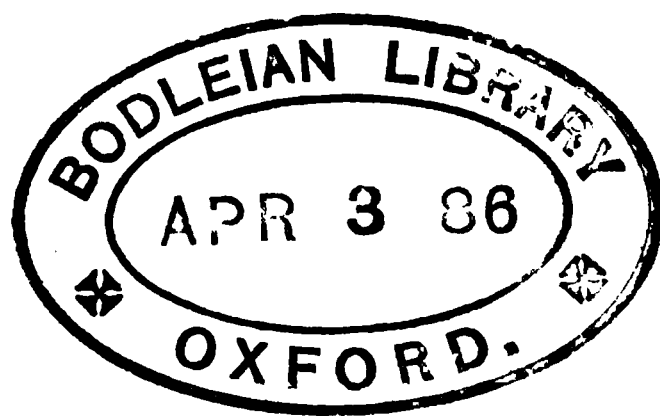
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This Volume
IS INSCRIBED,
WITH THE AUTHOR'S AFFECTIONATE ESTEEM,
TO HER OLD AND VALUED FRIEND,
MRS. WILLS,
OF FIRWOOD, PORTISHEAD,
SOMERSET.

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FORTUNE'S FAVOURITE.

CHAPTER I.

MR. OSBORNE'S DREAMS.

IT was Christmas Eve, and a remarkably cold one, too. Jonathan Osborne locked up his iron safe, put the keys into his pocket, and made speedy preparations for leaving the counting-house, of which he had been the presiding genius for about twenty years. To-morrow would be Christmas Day, and, of course, a holiday; but Christmas Day falling this year on Thursday, and Boxing Day, as a matter of course, succeeding, and Saturday being only half a day, and Sunday *non dies*, all the business world had agreed to keep closed shutters till the advent of Monday morning.

Mr. Osborne was a merchant, and, as was frequently affirmed, a most successful one. Some people said he was rich—very rich! while others denied the fact, on the ground that he had not had time to realise anything that could reasonably be called *wealth*. Still, there was no doubt that, to a certain extent, he had achieved *success*—the result of a long, steady, persevering, painstaking devotion to commercial pursuits. No sudden stroke of fortune had launched him unexpectedly on the full tide of prosperity; he had never inherited much more than the brains and the good common sense wherewith nature had gifted him. His straightforward integrity, his plodding, business ways, and his quiet, unwavering industry, had doubtless been the chief sources of all that he now enjoyed.

Jonathan was a mere nobody when he began life, and a "nobody" he would surely have remained had he not learned a few most important lessons in his youth. He had patiently borne the yoke in those boyish days, and he had uncomplainingly "kept his nose to the grindstone" all through the earlier years of manhood; hence the happy establishment of practical habits, that bore good, sound fruit in his maturity. He had not enjoyed any special advantages of education, though he had been favoured with a regular induction into the primary principles of the "three great R.'s." His parents had done their duty to the best of their ability, and what could they do more? A certain innate ambition had led the boy to profit by his limited opportunities, so that when at the age of fourteen he was taken from school, and "put to business," he was no contemptible scholar for that day—which knew nothing of Board schools, compulsory education, or standards of any kind whatsoever. He could read the Bible, and Goldsmith's History of England; he could spell respectably, and he very seldom murdered the Queen's English, or the King's English, which ever it might have been, so long ago, as interpreted by Lindley Murray; he wrote a good, clear, bold hand; and last, but not least, he was a splendid arithmetician, and kept his books—at first his employer's, afterwards his own—in most satisfactory condition.

He had served his time to a business that was not exactly retail or wholesale, but a judicious commingling of both; then he had continued his services in the same respectable old firm, till they became of so much undoubted value as to justify his admission to a partnership in the concern, on the strength of a capital so small as to be almost nominal; and by degrees he rose in the scale of importance till at last, partly by retirement, and partly by the death of his seniors, he reigned alone as "Osborne and Co.," of Lawrence Pountney Lane, E.C., the *Co.* being added, or so people believed, simply in anticipation of the time when Mr. Osborne's sons should be admitted to a share in the business as legal partners.

For Jonathan Osborne was a married man, and the father of a family. While still a young man he had wedded a

young lady of repute and, for her station, well connected. She was a farmer's daughter, and had been tolerably educated; she had, moreover, a little income of her own, which her friends took care should be settled upon herself and her children should she have any; also, she was modest and discreet, and went to the altar with the fullest intention of fulfilling conscientiously all the duties of a wife. She loved her husband unromantically, but sincerely; she was a good and prudent mother, she looked well to the ways of her household, and was generally respected and approved in the social circle to which she belonged.

During the first years of her married life, Christiana Osborne had borne five sons; and then till Philip, the youngest boy, was quite twelve years old, there seemed little probability of the nursery—as such—being ever again reconstituted in that household. And Jonathan was quite satisfied that his quiver should not be any fuller; five fine promising lads were enough to content any reasonable father, he frequently averred; and five sons would task all his energies to educate and settle in the world, according to his own and his wife's fond ambitions.

But at the end of twelve years, when the nursery had been turned into a sort of private sitting-room for the use of the elder boys, and when old nurse, who had brought up all five children, was thinking seriously of withdrawing altogether from active service, there seemed some prospect of an addition to the family, not very greatly to the satisfaction of Jonathan or of Christiana; for the latter had grown a trifle precise, and did not care for the inevitable disturbance that must ensue when there should be once more a little child in the house; and the father had already sketched out a plan of action by which his five sons should be honourably provided for—the arrangements, on which he duly prided himself, had left no room for a *sixth*! He began to look upon the expected arrival very much as if it might be an interloper.

And it so happened that when Mr. Osborne reached his home that frosty evening, he found things by no means in their usual order; the younger boys had been sent away to spend a part of their holidays with an old lady, who by

virtue of a distant relationship to their mother had always constituted herself "Aunt Jemima." The two elder, although it was Christmas-time, had gone out to spend the evening with a friend. The dinner was on the table, but there was no one to eat it; the German band that came prepared to perform its selections from Handel before the Osbornes' residence, according to custom, found themselves summarily dismissed, after having received the ordinary gratuity and being treated to hot mulled-claret.

It was Christmas morning before the usually well-ordered household subsided, and Mr. Osborne was waiting half anxiously, half fretfully, for tidings, when his widowed sister, Mrs. Fairfax, a matronly lady of high repute on such interesting occasions rushed into the room, where he was sitting rather lugubriously over the ashes of a neglected fire, and rapturously embraced him.

"Oh, Jonathan! my dear brother!"

"Well, Rachel!"

"I have to congratulate you, as I never was privileged to congratulate you before! Christiana is quite as well as can be expected, and very comfortable."

"Thank God for that. But there is a baby, I suppose?"

"Oh, *yes*—indeed! And what do you think, Jonathan?"

"There are not *two* of them, are there?"

"Well, no. But the one you have is—*not* a boy?"

"Then it must be a girl!" quoth Jonathan, with admirable logic. And feeling a little more overdone than he had affected to be, he quite broke down; sudden emotion surprising him, and almost in tears he gasped out, "Rachel, I have always longed for a daughter; I would never tell Chrissie so, lest she should be vexed. But after all these years—after five boys in succession—to think that I should be the father of a little girl! Well, thank God for all His mercies! I have always been proud of my boys, and grateful for them, too; but to-night's blessing fills my heart to overflowing. *Now* I can talk to people about my daughter."

And, indeed, it was true. Jonathan Osborne had longed

exceedingly for a daughter. There had been great rejoicings when the first two sons were born ; the third time he had hoped secretly for a girl, but he had not confessed to disappointment, though his wishes were crossed ; and again and again he had been congratulated on the birth of a fine boy. Now he was blessed indeed—the desire of his heart was granted to him ; he was almost rapturously happy, as he went up to his wife's bedside and welcomed the “ little stranger ” who had come to him on this thrice joyous Christmas morning.

That was a Christmas Day, indeed, apart from all other Christmas Days, that had ever been celebrated in good old fashion in the Osborne family. There were rejoicings in the dining-room, although the party was but limited ; and there was high-festival in the kitchen, where Miss Osborne's health was drunk with all honours in bumpers of the master's best old port, with cook solemnly installed at the head of the table, and Thomas—coachman, head-gardener, and general factotum—at the foot.

And afterwards, both banquets being brought to a happy conclusion, Mr. Osborne, by gracious permission of the authorities, retired to my lady's chamber, there to indulge in conversation with the invalid, and admiration of the baby.

“ Is she not a darling ? ” asked the mother, fondly contemplating her treasure ! “ Would you not like to hold her for a minute—just for one minute ? ”

“ I should like it ; I should like it very much indeed. But then, you see, I have no idea how one ought to hold little girls ; boys are so much more hardy.”

“ I fancy the same ways may serve for both, while they are still so young. I should like to see her in her father's arms, I think. Nurse will not hear of my sitting up, or I would give her to you.”

“ No ; you must not stir. I will venture to take her.”

And he did venture, and found the girl no more of a burden than the boys had been. The little human bundle of flannel and embroidery, with the tiny limbs and the soft pinky face, reposed quite comfortably in the masculine arms that trembled a little as they enfolded the precious babe.

And tears actually came into the father's eyes as they rested on the small, tender creature that lay so helplessly in his embrace.

"Chrissie," he said, after a moment's silence, "this is the best and loveliest Christmas present that you could have given me. She is a gem!"

"She is God's present, dear, not mine, though she has come to you through me. Oh, Jonathan, I have so longed for a *girl*! I have told myself that I did not—that I was quite content with my five bonnie boys; for what mother could be more blessed than I? Still, I did envy mothers with little baby girls prattling about them, and though you never said so, I felt sure that you would be quite as pleased as I to have a daughter."

"Pleased! I never was so delighted in my life. I could scarcely credit my senses when Rachel brought me the happy news. Of course I had *hoped*; who doesn't hope when there is a bare possibility? But we had begun to take boys as a matter of course; they run in some families, and they do in ours—I had plenty of brothers, but only one sister, as you know; and Rachel herself has never had a girl. I must confess, Christiana, that I was very much exercised in my own mind in debating what should be done with the *sixth* son I was expecting about this time. You see, my dear, our nursery has been empty so long, and we had made our arrangements so satisfactorily as to the boys' careers, that it really would have been a serious concern to make preparations for another. Now, a girl alters the case entirely—a girl does not want a career."

"Of course not; a girl may stay safely under her parents' wings till she has a home of her own—girls are born to be home-birds."

"Certainly they are; a father who can't or *won't* provide for his daughters does not deserve any."

"And yet, I suppose, one might have *too* many girls? Suppose now, this darling were our sixth, instead of our first girl?—and suppose you had not been a very prosperous man? There is your friend, Mr. Lodge, who has nine girls, and not too much to bring them up on; I don't see how he is to be blamed if some of them have to turn out

on the world presently. Boys *are* a comfort in some ways."

"A great comfort, especially when you have a good thriving business of your own, ready for at least two, if not three of them to step into. Now, you know, I have always intended James and John for the '*Co.*'! Oliver must have a downright good commercial education; of course, it is early days as yet with Herbert and Philip, but the latter seems to have a decided preference for the medical profession, and the former a strong leaning towards literature."

"I thought you did not like literature?"

"Nor do I, as a profession; literature is a very good *crutch*, but it is better to have legs to stand upon. Now, a good trade is like one's own limbs, sound and sturdy; a profession—unless it be a tremendously successful one—is never much better than a crutch. Give me trade, honest trade."

"But literature can never be trade?"

"Yes, it can—or rather, it can be so combined with trade as to make it no losing game. I intend Herbert to be a *publisher*. Oh, yes, I have mapped out the future of *all* my sons; in another year or two Herbert must go to school, first in Paris, afterwards in Germany; he must travel, too, the more widely the better. Also, I have already the nucleus of what will be Herbert's capital when he requires it. Now, this little pet will only want a liberal education to fit her for her proper sphere in life, and a *fortune* that will render her independent."

"Oh, yes, a fortune! a girl should either be well provided for, or well fitted to make provision for herself."

"And our girl, please God, shall have a fine fortune of her own. And, Chrissie, we must look after the main chance, now more than ever; if we are to do justice to our boys, they must not suffer because Providence has bestowed upon them a sister."

"Oh, no, no!—my boys are my boys," said the mother, with a smile on her pale lips. "They must have all the advantages you had decreed for them; only, for the baby's sake, we must be very careful."

"Of course we must ; we should not be where we are now if we had been anything else than careful. We have thriven upon thrift, my dear—industry and perseverance have been our main stepping-stones. But what is baby's *name* to be? Have you at all considered that point?"

"I have, and I have not. • I did not dare to count upon a girl—and yet—I thought such a thing *might* happen, and I wondered whether you would not prefer your mother's name."

"My mother's name? why, that was Dolly."

"Dorothy, rather, I fancy ; and Dorothy is the same as Dorothea, is it not?—*The gift of God*. Can any name be more beautiful?"

"Does it mean *that*? Well, our darling is the gift of God, certainly. But since this morning I have been thinking of all sorts of pretty names. Do you care particularly for Dorothy—or Dorothea?"

"I am not sure that I do ; and Theodora means just the same thing. Also, Florence is a pretty, soft name ; I had a little sister Florence, who died before I was born. I suppose Florence means *a flower*—and this is a sweet little flower, I am sure—a sweeter never sprung up on earthly soil. Or, suppose we said *Felicia*?"

"Felicia? That has something to do with happiness, if I don't mistake ; Felicia is the feminine of Felix ; and Rachel said if she had ever had a daughter she would have called her Stella—I am sure I do not know why."

"Stella is the Latin for *star*. I know so much of the language."

"And there was a Stella who had something to do with the celebrated Dean Swift ; and I remember that she was not at all a happy woman. We will not have our darling associated with any sort of unhappiness."

And then the baby began to cry, and had to be put back into bed again, and hushed upon the mother's arm. And before the little wail was quite ended nurse came in and decreed that her mistress must talk no more that night, she would be too much excited and get no sleep. So Mr. Osborne, as in duty bound, took his departure, not at all sorry to resign himself to the slumbers which had been so

much disturbed the night before ; he was by no means accustomed to be mulcted in the matter of regular repose.

The next day Mrs. Osborne was not quite so well, and doctor and nurse decreed that she was in no wise to be disturbed, so Jonathan spent his holiday rather sadly, in the silent dining-room, and longed for Monday morning, when the world would go on again as usual, and business be resumed. He tried to read, but his newspaper failed to interest him ; he took down a volume from the shelves—it was the inspiriting story of "*Ivanhoe*"—and Mr. Osborne always kept Sir Walter Scott's novels for holiday reading. But the woes of Rebecca the Jewess were dreadfully unreal, and not the sort of thing to amuse a man in the nineteenth century he decided ; the streets were very quiet, and the household quieter still ; the fire crackled and blazed, the cat lay stretched upon the hearthrug ; everything conduced to drowsiness, and ere long the book slipped from Mr. Osborne's hands, and he slept profoundly.

And as he slept, he dreamed—at first in the foolish inconsequent fashion in which we generally do dream ; but presently there came some sort of coherence into his dreams, and he was conscious of his own identity. He was Jonathan Osborne, of Lawrence Pountney Lane, and he was balancing his books for the year which was nearly ended. To his surprise the sum total showed a profit so enormous, that he could scarcely believe his eyes ; he went over the page again and again ; he added up the columns till he felt nearly dazed ; he went on repeating to himself the boyish formula he had learned at school—"units, tens, hundreds, thousands, tens of thousands, &c.," but still with the same bewildering result. His capital had increased so mightily during the twelve months that were past that it puzzled him to read off the figures as they stood at the bottom of the page.

He had begun the year with thousands—he was finishing it with *tens* of millions ! And even as he gazed, and rubbed his eyes in sheer perplexity, the millions expanded into billions ; and for all his gift of figures, and for all his money transactions, he could not for the life of him read the ever-

lengthening line that stretched further and further from left to right, till there seemed to it neither ending nor beginning. He was fairly aghast—a cold sweat gathered on his brow as he counted on—*on*—ON! and he gasped for breath when he arrived at *quintillions*, and found that he had not yet fathomed the extent of his most incredible wealth. His head ached, his eyes were dim, his brain reeled under the strain of that ceaseless torturing counting, which something constrained him to continue. Was there another *quintillionaire* in all the world? Had anybody alive ever heard of a *quintillionaire*? And if there were *quintillions* of money, why not *sextillions*—or *septillions*?—or, even, *dodeca*—but there he paused, never having even heard the word, which multiplies millions by the dozen.

And now the figures covered all the page from top to bottom; the ledger which he had taken from the safe became enormous; it expanded its vast proportions far beyond the large office-table on which he had first placed it; the figures became living creatures, and at every shuddering glance that fell upon them they were trebled and even quadrupled in number. All the arithmetic—all the mathematics—all the algebra on earth, would never—no, never, reduce them to order! They were intelligible things no longer; they were suddenly invested with an awful intelligence, an entity of their own; and he was doomed to go on counting—counting—counting to all eternity!

He struggled with the horrible nightmare, and partially awoke. He saw that he was in his own comfortable dining-room, not in the counting-house from which he had been vainly striving to escape. The fire was still at a clear glow, the cat purred still in the luxurious warmth, and "*Ivanhoe*" lay at his feet upon the rug.

With a sense of intense relief he understood that he had been dreaming, and he tried to rouse himself, and even looked down upon the book he had dropped, and thought that, having nothing better to do, he might as well go on with the story, and forget the unpleasant sensations of the last few minutes—for his dream had not occupied longer time. Before he fell asleep he had heard a distant church-

bell clanging—as solitary church bells do clang, most un-musically—for some belated evening service; and it was clanging still, like a muffled iron hammer striking lazily on a defective frying-pan.

But while he lay back, still in his easy-chair, lacking the energy to rise, pick up the book, and stroke the cat, as something half-prompted him to do, the discordant bell sounded fainter and fainter, and his senses were lulled once more into unconsciousness. And this time he dreamed, not about actual hard cash, but about the results of cash—such results as he had never even contemplated.

He was driving through the streets of the great city, in a wonderfully magnificent equipage; the carriage was luxuriously cushioned in richest, softest velvet; the horses—splendid long-tailed Arabs—were caparisoned in silver, and jewelled harness, and obsequious liveried servants were in attendance. He drove on, he knew not whither, till he came to a mansion—or palace, rather, where he knew he must alight. He ascended flights of steps, passed through a portico of inconceivable grandeur, crossed marble halls adorned with graceful sculpture, and lined with splendid paintings, and finally was ushered into a room wherein were assembled crowds of guests in costly and resplendent array. Sweet music resounded from the harps and voices of unseen minstrels, richest perfumes filled the air with subtle fragrance, and flowers of marvellous beauty entwined the jasper and porphyry columns that supported the lofty, star-gemmed roof. He had never in all his life been in a scene of such unimaginable splendour; he had attended a state banquet at the Mansion House, and he had dined once on a very special occasion at Fishmongers' Hall; but the glories of those festal civic palaces were not to be compared with these halls of light and splendour, such—as in his dream—he had never dreamed of! It was Aladdin's Palace and the Garden of Alcinous, all in one.

There was one stately figure that instantly riveted his gaze, as he advanced toward what seemed to be a canopied dais at the further end of the long apartment—the figure of a lady, richly clad, and “beautiful exceedingly.” A coronet of priceless gems confined her abundant golden tresses, and

pressed her snowy brow ; she was dazzlingly fair, and she bore herself with the grace and majesty of a royal princess. He pressed through the crowd, which fell back at his approach, and the fair vision raised her white jewelled hand, and beckoned him towards her. And as she did so, a sudden strange intelligence came to him ; he knew, and yet he did not know, the lady of his dream. She was a queen ; and yet she was the babe he had been holding in his arms only twenty-four hours ago ; years had sped by while he slept—since he had kissed the soft little cheek at his wife's bedside. The baby had grown up into a beautiful and gracious woman ; and yet he knew that she was his own precious daughter—his and Christiana's ! How had it all come about ?

Then some one near—he did not know who—told him that the radiant creature was indeed a queen—the Queen of Fortune, the Favourite of Nature, the child of Prosperity. And in her perfect lineaments he gradually recognised the inexpressive features of the babe upstairs. It was puzzling—it was incredible even—and as we do sometimes reason in our dreams, he realised the absurd inconsistency of his pleasant vision. He knew he was Jonathan Osborne, and that the infant was still an infant, lying upon its mother's breast, and not yet two days old. He realised the facts as facts ; and yet while he doubted, he could not bring himself to disbelieve the reality of all he thought he saw and heard. Was it another life upon which he had entered ? Was it the *Future*—the actual, awful, inscrutable Future—that was thus unrolled before him ? Was the shadowy veil that shrouds the far-off coming years mysteriously withdrawn ? Was he visited with a strange prescience of his darling's fate ?

And yet, though all sorts of possibilities and probabilities, and their reverse, were crowding in upon his mind, and he knew that it was mere delusion that filled his brain, he did not awake. For a moment or so, he was conscious of being on his own hearth, and he knew that all that had passed was but a fantasy, unreal and ridiculous ; and incongruous as unreal. But even while he smiled at his absurd fancies, he lost himself again ; he passed once more into

the land of forgetfulness, and this time "a change came o'er the spirit of his dream."

He was in a foreign country, in a land he had never visited before. He did not know the name of the city, he could not speak its language, and yet some instinct told him the meaning of all he heard. It was bitterly cold, and there were sounds of mourning on the wintry breeze. He saw a woman flying from her home, and disappearing, no one knew whither, in the darkness of the night; and the finger of scorn was pointed at her, while cruel tongues spoke bitter words of contumely and calumny, and he was taunted with being the father of so lost and miserable a creature. And with all a father's infinite love and pity, he went forth to seek, and, if it might be, save the outcast. For this hapless being was the same as she who had been worshipped as fortune's queen, she who had been flattered and caressed as prosperity's own child, she who was, and yet was not, the little babe of yesterday; his own flesh and blood—*his daughter!*

Whether it was the horror of the situation that seemed to rouse him, he could not tell; but the next moment his eyes were wide open, and he was in the full possession of all his faculties. He was very cold, and the room was almost dark; this sleep had been no brief one, and the fire was slowly dying out for want of replenishing. A door was opened, a flutter of petticoats advanced to the comfortless hearth, and a familiar voice was saying, "Why, Jonathan, are *you* here? The maids said you were gone out, and no one seems to have thought about your fire. One does not need to be told that the mistress is upstairs."

"It is very cold," said Jonathan, with a shiver. "Is that you, Rachel?"

"To be sure it is. When I heard you were out, I went straight up to Chrissie. I have been sitting with her ever so long."

"And is the baby there—*all right?*"

"To be sure she is; where else should a two-days' baby be, but at her mother's side, or in the nurse's lap? You were not expecting her downstairs, I suppose?"

"No, no! I hardly knew what I was saying; I have

been asleep, and I dreamt strange things about the baby. I thought she was grown up. Is the fire quite out ? ”

“ By no means ; a judicious stir with the pokerette and a handful of the faggots I know are within reach, will soon make it blaze up ; meanwhile do you ring the bell, and order them to light the gas and bring in the supper-tray. I am hungry, I can tell you, for I made but a very poor tea.”

“ What time is it ? ”

“ Why !—half-past nine ; later—a quarter to ten, by the hall clock. Jonathan, you must have had a good long nap. I hope you had pleasant dreams.”

“ Well, they were very extraordinary, certainly. I will tell you about them presently.”

“ Let us have some supper first ; you will be wide awake by that time ; you look quite dazed and dreamy still.”

The fire soon recovered itself, and burned up more brightly than ever under Mrs. Fairfax's superintendence ; the gas was lit, the maids bustled about, swept up the hearth, scolded the cat, picked up the unfortunate volume of “*Ivanhoe*,” and finally brought in the cold turkey, the hot mince-pies, and the Stilton cheese and celery. Mr. Osborne and his sister made a satisfactory repast.

When it was ended, and Mrs. Fairfax was indulging in the mulled claret that her brother insisted on administering before she went out into the cold, she reminded him of the strange dream that he said was somewhat perplexing him still.

“ Well,” he responded, “ it is rather foolish to say I am perplexed ; a dream is only a dream, after all, but this one has made an unwonted impression upon me. It was about the baby.”

“ Yes ; I understood that before, and that is easily accounted for, the baby having, naturally enough, been the principal subject of your thoughts since you were informed of her existence. And she had grown up preternaturally since yesterday morning, I think you said ? ”

“ Just so. I will tell you my dream as precisely as I can before I forget any part of it ; and you shall judge for yourself whether it was bad or good. The strangest part was

that sometimes I seemed to know it was all a dream, and sometimes I did not seem altogether unconscious."

"That is no unusual circumstance ; I fancy I have dreamt half awake and half asleep, myself. Now tell me the story at once, or it will fade from your memory. Why ! dreams, however vivid, dissolve of themselves ; does not Holy Writ itself say, ' As a dream when one awaketh.' Begin at once, please, for I told Janet to come for me before half-past ten ; I daresay she is in your kitchen now."

Thus adjured, Mr. Osborne related the dream—or rather series of dreams—which had so impressed him ; and he concluded by saying : " Now what do you think of it, Rachel ? "

" Think of it ? " replied Mrs. Rachel, rubbing her nose in a way peculiar to herself whenever she was asked a doubtful question. " It is simply a dream, and a very foolish one, too ; but not at all difficult to interpret. Of course you dreamed about figures, for I am sure they haunt you day and night. When you were quite a little chap, I remember you beginning the multiplication table when I told you to say your prayers ; and you awoke up one night, very much to poor mother's disturbance of mind, jabbering about '*vulgar fractions*.' But I don't see what the baby had to do with your book-keeping."

" Nor I, exactly ; and yet in my own mind I can perceive a certain connection. I have been thinking all day that she must be properly provided for. But the second part of my dream is the most extraordinary."

" The palace is quite as easily accounted for as the counting-house ; it is one of those queer, upside down sort of reflections upon the brain, which it amuses one to think of. Don't you remember how you and the boys were discussing a new pantomime the other day, and James was describing some beautiful transformation scenes, and speaking of '*The Fairies' Bower*'—or *Hall*, or something like it—that he saw, when he went with the young Carters to the theatre, this time last year ? As for the last act in the drama, I daresay it came out of something you had read long ago, and forgotten. Why, I have dreamed before now of stories I read in the days of my childhood. Only the

other night I had a remarkable dream of my poor, dear, departed Joseph Fairfax. I forgot that we had ever been married; he was my young lover again, and we were taking our first walk—which, by the way, was a stolen one—on the banks of some river, that I am sure I never saw except, perhaps, in a picture, long, long ago. Weeks before—months, indeed—when I was going from home for the spring cleaning, and turning out some of my drawers before I went, I came upon a bundle of his letters that had not been opened for years. The reading of those old letters reminded me of some things that had quite gone out of my head. I suppose some sort of memory was revived; and one night, when my supper disagreed with me, I dreamed a lot of the most absurd nonsense about those far-away times. By the way, Jonathan, what did you eat for dinner?"

"Pretty much the same as I ate yesterday, only to-day's turkey was boiled instead of roasted, and the plum-pudding was warmed up. Perhaps, I rather overdid the oyster-sauce; cook quite excelled herself, as she can do if she likes to take the pains—especially in the matter of soups and sauces. No; I am not sure but that my dinner did disagree with me a little."

"And I believe the stomach is the weak point with most of us, who have said good-bye to a youthful digestion; the stomach—*infra dig.* as it is to mention it—is the tyrant that rules over brain and nerves, and all the finer organs of the system. Depend upon it, Jonathan, it was that oyster-sauce that transported you to fairyland; there is nothing like dyspepsia for giving you uneasy dreams."

"Then you do not think the dream *meant* anything, Rachel?"

"It meant oyster-sauce and fried plum-pudding; and perhaps a glass too much wine."

"But you do not think it was a sign of what is to come? Remember the chief butler and the chief baker?"

"I do remember them; and the lean kine and the fat kine; but I am not the patriarch, and I think we know so much more in these days than the old Israelites knew in theirs, that God does not concern Himself to teach us by dreams. I am not in the least superstitious."

"Neither am I ; yet—still——"

"Yet still you cannot forget your jumble of dreams? Well, then, remember them to some good end. Don't go on heaping up riches, not knowing who shall inherit them ; my dear husband always said you were a little too worldly-minded—just a *leetle* too fond of filthy lucre. Also, bring up your daughter in the fear of God ; and though she may not grow up a fairy-queen, or dwell in halls of dazzling light, she may be the presiding genius of a happy home, and rule over a realm of her own, some day or other. Now I must go home, for I heard the half-hour chimes some time ago. No, not a drop more, Jonathan!—or I shall be coming to you with *my* dreams before breakfast to-morrow morning."

Half an hour afterwards, Mr. Osborne turned into his wife's room to say good-night ; the baby was slumbering soundly, so was the nurse ; but Christiana was wide awake, and seemed quite ready for a little chat. He had the prudence, however, to refrain his lips, for he knew that if he began to talk at all, the marvellous dream of the evening would surely crop up in some phase or other ; and it would not do to excite the invalid, as he himself had been excited ever since Mrs. Fairfax had roused him from his troubled slumbers.

"They are taking care of you downstairs, dear?" asked Chrissie, as she buried her head again in the pillows. "I told cook to look after you as if you were the Lord Mayor and the whole Court of Aldermen."

"She has looked after me a little too well, I am afraid. And, Chrissie, I have thought of a *name* for your baby."

"Ah, what is it? I hope it is *Dorothea*!"

"Well—no ; it is—*Regina*."

"*Regina*? Why, Victoria signs herself 'V.R.'"

"Well, I suppose, our little pet must not subscribe herself just the same. She must be 'R.' without the 'V.' She shall be Queen of Hearts instead of Queen of England."



CHAPTER II.

DOLORES.

ON Monday morning Mr. Osborne woke up to the pleasant remembrance that the world was to go on its way again ; that is to say, shops, offices, and banks were to be opened, and business generally resumed. Omnibuses would take their ordinary course, trains would be run as usual, and the regular work-a-day traffic would go on in the city, and in the suburbs, at the East-end and at the West-end, above Bridge and below Bridge, on both sides of the river and everywhere else that could be counted as among the haunts of busy men. It was a real joy to Jonathan Osborne to be in Lawrence Pountney Lane once more. He always took holidays with a bad grace, though it must be conceded, in extenuation of the charge, that he grudged them to himself far more than to any of his subordinates.

And just now he felt unusually impatient to get into harness again. He would not confess the truth even to himself, but he certainly experienced a curious sort of eagerness to be once more alone in his private office, with his "books" before him—those wonderful books that had baffled even his long-tried arithmetical powers while he sojourned in the magic land of dreams. Besides, it was more imperative than ever now that he should balance his accounts exactly. He must know to five pounds—to *five shillings* !—how much he was worth. He must keep faith with "the boys," who would expect promises made to them, and promises implied, to be fulfilled ; and then there was the precious little daughter—his Regina—to be endowed with a handsome fortune, every fraction of which had yet to be accumulated.

He turned over, rather hastily, the great ledgers that were heaped on the oak table at which he generally sat. They looked exactly as they had looked as he nodded by the fire on the evening of Boxing Day ; he knew their outward and visible appearance by heart. Inside they

presented just the same aspect as when last he saw them. He was too good a man of business to underrate or overrate his own resources ; and the sum total of the balance in his favour was precisely that which he had carried in his memory ever since he turned the key in the iron safe, on the afternoon of Christmas-eve. And it was not by any means a balance to despise. His capital had steadily increased throughout the past year ; his business had extended itself beyond his expectations ; every speculation had been prosperous, every venture a success.

He was just making some private entries in the pocket-book which he always carried about with him, when one of his principal clerks begged to be admitted. He had a business question of some importance to ask, and, that being answered, he loitered a little, as if desirous to prefer some favour of his own. Mr. Osborne clasped his pocket-book with a snap, and said, rather sharply, "What is it, Derrington ?"

"Could I be allowed to return to my home an hour or two earlier than usual ?"

"An hour or *two* earlier ? Be definite—say precisely at what time you want to leave."

"I should like to leave at half-past three. I should have liked not to come at all ; I did think of sending an excuse, only holiday time is just over, and I know there is extra business now to be attended to."

"We must be very busy indeed for the next few days. There is an order from Rio just come in that will have to be shipped off early in the New Year, and you are the man I shall principally depend upon to see that all is promptly completed. What is the matter ? Have you not had holiday enough ?"

"More than enough, as far as I am personally concerned. But, Mr. Osborne—sir—my wife is very, *very* ill. Two doctors have been called in, and both are agreed that she has but a poor chance."

"What is the matter with her ?"

"She has another baby—a sixth child, and a sixth girl ! She has been a good deal worried, in one way or another, and perhaps she is not so strong as she was. Anyhow,

things have gone wrong with her, as they never did before. She wants rallying power, the doctors say. They did not exactly say she would *die*, but they inferred it."

"Poor fellow!" said Mr. Osborne, considerably softened; "you shall go home with all possible speed, and if there should be no decided amendment, you need not come here to-morrow morning. When was your wife confined?"

"Early on Christmas morning, before daylight. The elder children were in ecstasies over their pretty new sister—their 'welcome Christmas Present,' as they called her. Poor little girls! their present will cost them dear, I am afraid."

"On Christmas morning! Why, Derrington, you and I are, in one sense, in the same boat. My wife presented me with a daughter early on the morning of the 25th; only mine, though like yours, the sixth child—is the first girl, and Mrs. Osborne, I am thankful to say, is doing extremely well, and the baby too. But what has worried Mrs. Derrington, eh?"

"A good many things. First of all, a well-to-do relation of hers, from whom she had expectations, died, and left every penny of his money to public charities. Then a little business that she had taken to on her own account did not answer, and we lost all we had scraped together, and incurred a debt besides. She has been a thrifty, cheery little woman, has my poor wife; but she has never held up her head since we had to wind up, as best we could, six months ago; she has had the most gloomy presentiments, and she has said repeatedly that the coming of this unlucky child would prove to be the last straw on the camel's back. If the baby had been a boy, I think she might have found some comfort, for we have never had a son; but when she knew that a woman-child was born into the world, she gave way altogether; and what do you think she will have it the baby's name must be?"

"How should I know? If it were a lad, I should say *Benoni*, perhaps."

"That would do very well for a boy, I suppose. But the little one is to be called Dolores."

"*Dolores* ! That's not English."

"No ; it is Spanish. My wife's aunt married a Spaniard, and had her niece with her at Barcelona for ever so many years. Dolores means the 'Child of Sorrow,' or something quite as bad."

"I would not call the child by such an unlucky name, if I were you, Derrington. Of course, it does not answer to thwart a mother under such untoward circumstances ; but if she gets over it—and while there is life there is hope, you know, always—I would think of a prettier, livelier name for the poor little maid."

"I dare say we shall generally call her *Dolly*, if she lives ; she seems but a frail little morsel—the only puny child we have ever had."

"Well, *Dolly* is not so bad. My own baby stood a pretty good chance of being 'Dolly.' For Dorothy was my mother's name, and my wife fancied it, because Dorothy—or Dorothea, which comes to nearly the same thing, I suppose—means the *gift of God*."

"And," pursued Mr. Derrington, with evident interest, "may I be allowed to inquire what the young lady's name really is ?"

"Ah, it was all very well of me to demur to an un-English name ; but when you know my choice, you may very well retort. I have had my treasure properly registered already as '*Felicia Regina Osborne*.' That's a Latin name, I take it ; it is no more English than your Dolores."

"*Felicia* sounds something like felicity. *Regina* makes one think of Her Majesty the Queen."

"That's just it. We may freely translate the name into the 'Queen of Happiness.' We shall call her 'Queenie' for short, I dare say. But now go home, Derrington ; and—it might cheer your wife a little—there's no restorative better than good news ; and it won't do you any harm to learn that I quite intend to raise your salary from to-day. And there's a little Christmas-box for the baby, as she has had the good luck to arrive at the same time as mine."

The little Christmas-box was a five-pound note, and poor Derrington received it gratefully. With sickness and trouble in the house, and straitened means, he could not but take

as grist all that came to his mill. His little Dolores would not want it yet awhile ; perhaps she would never want it ; if her mother went, it might be a mercy that she should go too.

"Where do you live?" asked Mr. Osborne, as the clerk was preparing to take his departure.

He really had no idea where any of his dependants lived, except his cashier, who sometimes came to him on special business after office hours.

"My home is at Brixton," replied Derrington. "It is as convenient as any place for the City."

"And not so very far from Clapham Common. I shall tell my sister, Mrs. Fairfax, to take the omnibus, and come and see how you are getting on. Mrs. Osborne will be very much interested, I am sure, when she knows that Mrs. Derrington's baby and her own arrived so nearly together. Dear me ! they must have been born under the same star—or *planet*, or whatever it is—that astrologers preach to us about. And yet, my child is 'Queenie,' and yours is Dolores ! Mine the child of Happiness ; yours the child of Sorrow."

"I am afraid all mine will find plenty of hard nuts to crack as they go through the world, sir. I am thankful there are no more of them—heiresses to hard work and privation. I am not quite in such evil case as a man whom I have known all my life ; he was imprudent enough to marry before he was twenty-one ; he had not saved a half-penny, and he had no prospects. His wife was a pretty, pleasure-loving lass, just over sixteen, and she has brought him—I can't say to one or two—how many olive branches. But *I think* it was the thirteenth that occasioned the last christening party to which we were invited, but did not go."

"Your friend was a simpleton, Derrington ; he deserves to have his quiver inconveniently full. A man has no right to marry and trust to Providence for the means of bringing up a family. But now, be off ! You will be glad to get back to your wife ; and I have letters to write for the Brazilian mail. I trust you will find Mrs. Derrington a little better."

And Mr. Osborne drew the big inkstand to his side, and selected his own particular pen, putting on such a business face as he did so, that his clerk quite understood that the private interview was concluded. With reiterated thanks and an expressive bow, he left the room, while his principal began the letter which must be posted no later than on the morrow. But having written the date and the orthodox prefatory commencement he paused, feeling rather uncertain as to what should follow. He had seldom much difficulty in getting through his correspondence; his words ran glibly enough from his pen in most instances, but this morning it was rather an exception to the rule. He had been interrupted; Derrington had broken the thread of thought that he was carefully elaborating, and—he could not but own it—he had felt rather unsettled ever since the arrival of Felicia Regina Osborne.

Nor could he instantaneously put Mrs. Derrington and her dolorous baby out of his head. He was delighted with his one daughter; but *six* girls, one after the other, were quite another thing. And though he knew very little of his dependent's private affairs, he did know what sum had been handed over to him as *salary* during the last few years, and it must have been as much as he and his wife could do to make both ends meet, with so many little mouths to fill and so many little shoes and socks to buy, not to speak of the educational demands that must be an ever-increasing necessity.

“I think I shall send Rachel to see how things are with them,” he soliloquised. “Somehow—of course it is only fancy—this girl-baby seems to have a sort of claim upon me. And yet it is too absurd to concede so much simply because my own child and she happened to come into the world together. Why! *lots* of children were born, I dare say, on Christmas Day in the morning. I might just as well trouble myself about them *all* as this one in particular. I wonder if the sick woman has everything she needs; they can't keep up a very luxurious *ménage* on a hundred and fifty pounds a year; but then, people should not marry on such a narrow income if they want to be comfortable. I know what it is to be a poor clerk well enough; my means

were as limited for I don't know how long. But then, I had only myself to keep. I did not even presume to think of a wife till I could see my way to a steady increase of fortune; I had no idea of marrying the instant I had enough to live upon. To have no hope—that is, no reasonable prospect of improving one's circumstances—is simply odious, and if a man gets no richer, he is pretty sure to get poorer, and 'poorer' means poorer still—poorer and poorer. It is a great mistake to marry till one sees one's way clear and fair and well ahead. And, of course, improvident folk are nothing to me; if they will marry imprudently, they must fight it out as bravely as they can, *or* go to the wall. Why should I trouble myself with other people's business? All that concerns me is to see that they do their duty as good servants of the firm, and to pay their salaries regularly. I count it no better than *cheating* to keep a young fellow married or single, out of his money when it is really due. Still, I can't help thinking about Derrington and his wife and their child with the dismal name. Miss Dolores, of Brixton, and Miss Regina, of Clapham Common, happened to put in an appearance all but simultaneously, and that is the long and the short of it, and I cannot help myself. And as I cannot make myself write a straightforward sensible letter, I think I'll give it up, and yield to the force of circumstances, or to the chapter of accidents, or whatever I may conclude to accept as the *inevitable*. I'll just wire a message across the water, and write full particulars another day."

Meanwhile, Mr. Derrington made the best of his way to Brixton, to a little out-of-the-way street, which we choose to call Dorchester Street, not knowing whether, in actual fact, such a street exists, or not. And almost at the end of it, just where it was crossed by another street, meaner and duller still, and yet its prototype, Mr. Derrington paused and drew forth his latch-key. The house into which he entered was small enough, so small that it might have puzzled anybody not born with a brilliant genius for planning, and contriving, and making shifts, to know how it could be possible to stow away, within its narrow walls, the husband and wife, six children, and a juvenile domestic of

the *slavey* species, supposed to be a nursemaid, or general servant, as occasion might require.

And just now there was a little extra over-crowding, for a severe-looking, not particularly neat, elderly woman, calling herself the *monthly-nurse*, had taken upon her broad shoulders the regulation and conduct of the household. There are monthly-nurses *and* monthly-nurses, of course, and some of them are very nice, kind, motherly—and even lady-like personages, no doubt; but then, for first-rate attendance of any kind, you must—such is the law of this world—pay first-rate price. There are very few things to which you may be certainly welcome, without laying down some sort of an equivalent—perhaps temporal law demands it. Perhaps there is only *one* inestimable blessing which you may ensure—*without money and without price!* There is only *One* who will give drink to the thirsty soul, and meat to the hungry soul, and medicine to the sick, and wine to the worn and weary, and require *no* payment, only the voluntary return of love, and praise, and gratitude.

Mrs. Umbleby was a fair specimen of her class, she was neither better nor worse than others of her most useful, and all but indispensable sisterhood. She was not quite a *Mrs. Gamp*, nor yet a *Mrs. Harris*, but she was somewhat of their type; and what is still more to the point, hers were the best services that poor Derrington's slender resources could command. Had poor Susan Derrington been just a step or two lower in the world, she might have counted on the charitable aid of her next-door neighbour—for the *very* poor play the good Samaritan to each other, *almost* “without money, and without price!” At the very best they are well repaid by the happy consciousness of having done *what they could*; and by the hope and expectation of finding like comfort and mercy in the time of their own extremity.

But Mrs. Derrington being “respectable,” and having been brought up to observe and reverence certain laws of society, it was essential that she should be provided, in the hour of her trial, with her own professional nurse. And money being sadly scarce just then, Mrs. Umbleby was the result.

Poor Derrington gave one hasty glance at the windows of his habitation as he drew forth his latch-key. Thank God! no blind save that of the sick-chamber was lowered, there was no sign of death about the house. His wife was certainly still in the land of the living. He closed the door very softly behind him, and advanced along the narrow passage to the tiny sitting-room beyond, in which the family were generally assembled. The children were all there, except the new arrival and the two-year-old baby, now promoted to be "Annie," whose nose, of course, had been duly declared to be out of joint, in consequence of the advent of "Miss *Dolorous*," as the slavey, Becky, very naturally pronounced the baby's name.

Annie was being carried about below stairs by the "slavey," who was a very good and faithful little drudge to the best of her abilities. She nursed, and scrubbed, and scoured, and cooked, and washed, and ironed—just as occasion required, and with very little grumbling, considering that she was barely thirteen, her wages infinitesimal, and her privileges *nil*! Derrington's two elder daughters, Kitty and Nellie, were looking after their two next sisters, Jennie and Maggie; that is to say, they were scolding Jennie when she pulled Maggie's hair, and severely reprimanding Maggie for not enduring personal assault in silence when "poor mamma was so very, very ill, and must not be disturbed!" Then Jennie had to be coaxed, as well as reprimanded, because she wept bitterly under reproof; and both the juniors had to be ceaselessly warned away from the window, from the edge of the fender, and from a recreation that seemed to be exactly to their minds—that of pulling to pieces, thread by thread, the already dilapidated horse-hair coverings of the parlour chairs.

"How is mamma, Kitty?" asked the father, anxiously. Kitty was old enough to know something of the great trouble that might be impending.

"Nurse says she is no better," replied Kitty, with a premature gravity in her young face. "She has been giving her brandy in her beef-tea, but it does not seem to revive her. She says she is too far gone to be roused; she hoped

you would come home early, and you *are* early—much earlier than usual.”

“Yes ; I told Mr. Osborne how very ill mamma was, and about the baby. Curiously enough, there is a baby newly arrived at *The Acacias*, and that made him more sympathetic than I have ever known him to be before. He bade me make all haste home, and come back when there was a change for the better.”

“Nurse says there will be no change for the better,” interrupted Nellie. “Have you had your dinner, papa ?”

“No, child ; I have not even thought about it ; I am not hungry. Have you had yours ?”

“Not our proper dinner. Nurse had no time to get dinner ready, and Becky has never had Annie out of her arms since you went away ; we think she is getting more teeth. But Mrs. Brown, opposite, sent us in a nice big lump of gingerbread, so big that we could not eat it all.”

And, indeed, two great rations of thick, heavy, sticky, dark-hued cake were still lying on the hearth-rug, and there were crumbs all over the carpet. “Not very digestible stuff for the poor children,” he murmured, as he kicked a piece out of his way. “I shall go and see for myself how mamma is, Kitty ; you and Nellie take care of the little ones, and keep them quiet.”

With which injunction he shut the parlour door, and ascended the steep narrow stairs that led to three little sleeping-rooms above. In the front chamber—the largest of all, and that not more than twelve feet square—lay Mrs. Derrington, apparently in a half doze or stupor that was almost unconsciousness. “How is she now ?” the husband asked, in a whisper, as he drew near the bed-side.

“Much about the same, sir,” said Mrs. Umbleby, with an ominous shake of her untidy cap. “She doesn’t speak, though she gives a low moan now and then, and I can’t get her to take a drop or bit of anything. She don’t seem to hear a word I say ; suppose you try to rouse her, sir ?”

Thus adjured, Derrington sat down on the side of the bed, and took his wife’s thin hand in his ; it was chill and damp—damp with the dews of swiftly-coming death—his heart misgave him. “She is cold ! you have let the fire

die down ; why don't you keep things more comfortable ? ” he asked, irritably.

“ Laws, it isn't in fires to warm her now,” said Mrs. Umbleby, almost scornfully. “ Why, bless you, Mr. Derrington, it's no use mincing of the matter—don't you know the look of death when it's straight before you ? There's scarce a bit of life left in her ; not all the medical profession in the world could do her any good, *now* ! She'll go off like a lamb, you'll see.” And, indeed, poor Susan Derrington was quietly slipping off this earthly tabernacle, as she lay, scarcely breathing, on her pillows. The shadow that falls but once on mortal lineaments had fallen now on hers ; her face was grey, or rather ashen-white, her eyes were closed, her chin a little fallen ; she was “ passing away ” without a struggle—without one thought of the little ones, or of the husband she was leaving behind her.

Half-an-hour or more passed slowly away. The dying woman gave no sign ; she neither stirred nor spoke, only a deeper shadow seemed to fall upon the pallid face. Her husband tried to administer a little port wine, then a little brandy, but she made no attempt to swallow either.

“ Wet her poor lips,” suggested the nurse ; “ not a drop will ever go down her throat again. When they are so far gone as she is, it ain't of any mortal use to try to bring them back ; it only bothers and worries them, poor dear souls.”

“ Should not the children come up ? ” he asked presently.

“ Well, I suppose they did ought to be here,” replied Mrs. Umbleby. “ She won't know nothing, but, in days to come, the little ones will like to remember that they said good-bye to their poor dear ‘ *mumma*, ’ ” which was Mrs. Umbleby's very extraordinary way of pronouncing “ *mamma*, ” the accent invariably on the first syllable. “ I'll step down and fetch 'em,” she continued, as she laid the baby across the bottom of the bed—“ take care she don't roll off, which she might, if her *mumma* was to give one sudden lurch ; some does, if there's a dying struggle. So give an eye to the child, or, what's better, just keep your hand upon her little gound.”

No need to watch the profound slumbers of the infant : she slept so heavily that Derrington, though not a suspicious man, felt pretty well convinced that she had been dosed with *Godfrey's Cordial* ; she had wailed feebly but ceaselessly all through the previous night. In three minutes' time the children came trooping into the room—Kitty and Nelly leading Jennie and Maggie, Annie in the youthful slavey's arms, sucking a big lump of something that was supposed to be sugar-candy.

"I thought Becky had better come in," explained Mrs. Umbleby ; "she'll be sure to be wanted, and, besides, it's a good thing to see a death-bed while your heart is young and tender."

Perhaps the hurried bustle of toddling feet roused the mother, for she slowly opened her eyes and looked pitifully into her husband's face, then tried to stretch out her feeble arms as if to gather her little flock into a last embrace. Becky's instinct interpreted the wistful gaze, and she placed her charge upon the bed close to her dying mistress. Jennie and Maggie scrambled there of their own accord, not heeding the nurse's uplifted warning finger. The two elder girls pressed to the bedside, and Kitty stooped and kissed the mother, who had scarcely strength to kiss back again.

"God bless you—bless you all ! bring the baby," gasped the dying woman ; and then she made a supreme effort to place her hand on first one little head and then upon another ; but her hand was nerveless, and her eyes were dim—the film of death was fast gathering over them.

Derrington understood the pathetic gesture, and he brought each child to be blessed in turn, and, last of all, he kissed the cold, colourless lips himself. There was a slight thrill of response, then a heaving of the breast, then a long-drawn quivering sigh, and all was over.

"The mouth that kissed last, kissed alone."

"Send the children away," said the widower, after a short interval, broken only by fitful sobs ; "take the little ones away, Kitty, but let me have my motherless Dolores in my own arms."

And Kitty, with a womanly composure—far exceeding

her years—placed the new-born baby in her father's arms ; and, as he gathered up the tiny frail creature in his embrace, he exclaimed, "Comfort me, my child of sorrow ! for your little life has cost me very dear."



CHAPTER III.

QUEENIE'S WISH.

THERE is very little to record of Miss Regina Osborne during the earliest years of her existence ; we have only to assure everybody at all interested in her biography that she grew and prospered exceedingly. Of course she was *christened*, but her parents not being of the Episcopalian persuasion, she missed the questionable blessing of sponsors, so that she had to depend upon her mother and her Aunt Rachel for proper instruction in "the Creed, the Lord's Prayer, and the Ten Commandments in the vulgar tongue." Also, failing godparents, she had to go without the orthodox reception of silver mugs, and spoons, and knives and forks, according to the metalliferous custom which prevails in certain circles. She did very well, however, without either godfather or godmother, or the rich gifts they might possibly have presented.

As soon as she could lisp and bow her little knees Christiana—true to her name—taught her to kneel, and say her morning and evening prayer, asking God to bless her and take care of her, and make her a good girl, &c., &c. ; and Aunt Rachel prayed earnestly for the child when the pastor took her in his arms, and duly baptized her as—*Felicia Regina Dorothea Osborne* ! The mother prayed, too ; for motherhood had taught her how every good and precious gift comes from the Father of all Spirits, and she sought for her darling not only the good things of this life, but all rich blessings for that which is to come, "O, my Father !" was

her devout supplication, "take my little one into Thy kind keeping ; shield her from all evil, and shower down upon her all prosperity, spiritual as well as temporal. Endow her with the best things, O Lord ; grant her all she needs, in body and in soul ; make her Thine own child, and rule her heart, so that she may serve Thee in love, and bring her at last, when her days on earth are ended, to thine heavenly kingdom. And, oh ! make *me* worthy of the precious trust Thou hast reposed in me ; show me how to bring her up for Thee, and grant to me that wisdom which I so greatly need, that I may teach her and lead her to walk, from her infancy upwards, in the paths of piety and peace."

Christiana Osborne was not a very far-seeing woman ; nature had not gifted her with supreme talent of any sort ; she was of a sweet, amiable disposition, and she sought to do her duty as wife and mother to the best of her ability. She was patient, and gentle, and unselfish, and she did not expect, or even wish, that her children should tread exactly in her own footsteps ; she was not at all clever, nor was she in any sense strong-minded, and her boys had long ago found out that "mother" might be persuaded into almost anything, provided it were not a sin, a forbidden thing, which her conscience disallowed.

Her husband would sometimes say, "I do wish, Chrissie, you would not let those rebels get over you so easily ! Let them understand that you bear rule over them, and that your will, not theirs, is to be the guiding principle of the household. When you say a thing is to be, let it be and see that you are obeyed to the letter ; when you disapprove never permit yourself to be influenced ; don't issue commands or vetoes hastily, but once having spoken, let that be enough. Hold your own, my dear, and keep the boys in due subjection," and Chrissie did her best to enforce discipline ; for "the boys," though good boys in the main, and not more mischievous than the generality of their kind, really needed something more than the very lax rule which prevailed when their father was away in the City. James and John had rather strong opinions, and they were not slow to proclaim or to support them ; Oliver had a temper of his own, which led him pretty frequently into scrapes at school,

and misunderstandings with his brothers at home ; Herbert and Philip were both a little spoiled—particularly the latter, who had been the baby and the pet of the whole house for so many years. Still, all these lads, from James and John respectively turned seventeen and eighteen, and deeming themselves young men, with rights and privileges of their own, down to saucy little Philip, who was exactly twelve years and a quarter older than the baby, loved their mother sincerely, and were always sorry if they were convinced that they had, either in word or deed, actually vexed or pained her. Despite her meekness, and her too-conspicuous fault of being not unfrequently over-persuaded, she displayed a certain stamina of principle, a backbone of moral courage that commanded their respect ; and the older the boys grew, the more they cared for “mother,” the more they deferred to her requests, and the more they endeavoured to manifest an affectionate regard towards her. It is a mother’s own fault if her children, especially her sons, as they attain to manhood, break loose from maternal control, and evince a spirit of disdain and defiance ; she has been, as a parent, either unwise, or selfish, or unduly self-opinionated ; or, perhaps, altogether mistaken, if not entirely unworthy.

Chrissie Osborne’s deep humility saved her *in toto* from being in any way *unworthy* ; if she made mistakes—as we must confess she did make them—they were, as a rule, the result of too much distrust of herself ; too little confidence in her own judgment and determination ; too little self-reliance, when it was essential that weakness should yield to strength, youth to maturer age, inexperience to experience. She was, as I have tried to make you understand, not the wisest, not the most prudent, or the most sagacious of mothers ; but she was, according to the testimony of her sons, when they arrived at years of discretion, “the dearest, sweetest, best, and most loving and lovable of little mothers in the world !”

But Jonathan, her husband, though he took her to task occasionally, on the subject of over-leniency where the boys were concerned, never remonstrated with her on the lack of discipline, as exemplified in her conduct towards her

daughter. Regina—or, as she came to be called before she was a week old, “Queenie,”—could do no wrong. Her father and mother concurred on certain points most decidedly; Queenie was to have her own sweet way in every respect; Queenie was not to be contradicted; Queenie was not to be thwarted; Queenie was to have whatever she desired or demanded!—except, perhaps, the legendary “top-brick of the chimney!” And I am by no means sure that measures would not have been taken to procure even *that*, if Queenie had persisted in crying or clamouring for the one thing she so absurdly wanted. Anything short of the moon she might certainly have had—at any cost of pains or expense, if only she had chosen to make fuss enough about it.

Her brothers, one and all, bowed down and worshipped her; they grudged their precious little sister nothing; they were absolutely content to feel her baby-fingers tugging at their hair, or slapping their faces, or confiscating their most cherished possessions. Queenie might scream, or cry, or scratch, or break and smash *ad libitum*, she was never to blame. There were always extenuating circumstances. Everybody had an excuse for her, and consequently no one ever dreamed of finding fault with or taking to task the pretty little idol of the family.

She was docile, too, in many respects; she learned to read, and even to write, rather easily. She would sit still in church because she liked going there, and she very early developed a taste for music, and learned to join in the tunes she heard from Sunday to Sunday. It pleased her to listen to the organ, and if she grew tired of the sermon she went comfortably to sleep on her father's arm, or snugly ensconced at the bottom of the pew curled up on a hassock, her head upon her mother's lap.

She had little feverish colds, of course, from time to time, and once she took measles, which happened to be prevalent in the neighbourhood; but she passed through all her infantile ailments with so little suffering that her doting parents' anxieties were never very much awakened. As she was allowed to do so exactly as she pleased, it is perhaps a wonder that she escaped so many of the maladies incidental

to childhood ; but though not actually robust, she was endowed with an excellent constitution, and her mother watched carefully and interfered judiciously whenever it was necessary to exercise restraint. Moreover, she was not a wayward child, and she was very early amenable to good advice, and could be reasoned with to a certain degree and led by moral suasion. On the whole, Miss Regina Osborne, in her very early youth, was not at all difficult to manage, and, as she very seldom encountered opposition, she was not unseldom quoted as "that dear little well-behaved girl at 'The Acacias !' "

The sudden interest which Mr. Osborne had entertained in poor Richard Derrington's motherless Dolores had never quite died out ; he always sent the child a birthday present when the 25th of December came round, and, in consideration of the somewhat necessitous condition of the whole family, it was generally a pretty substantial one—such as brought a little extra comfort and modest enjoyment to the household in dismal Dorchester Street. Queenie had often heard about Dolly Derrington, who was born on the same day and almost at the same hour as herself, and one day she took it into her wise little head that she wanted to see Dolly.

Of course, she had sundry small friends of her own, and as she grew out of infancy she was encouraged to give sundry juvenile parties—sometimes in honour of her birthday, and sometimes because both mother and father were afraid of her growing dull and old-fashioned in her ways, as the result of living almost entirely with her elders ; for her youngest brother Philip was now a young man in his twentieth year, studying for the medical profession ; Herbert was making his way in the warehouse of an eminent publisher ; Oliver was taking a good position as a civil engineer ; and both James and John were partners in the concern in Lawrence Pountney Lane. James, indeed, was very shortly to be married, and he was now busy in making arrangements for his future residence ; John was still at home, and spent most of his leisure under his parents' roof. He was prouder than ever of his bonnie little sister, the Queen of "The Acacias," as he sometimes playfully named her.

But still Queenie *was* just a little "old-fashioned," and,

as a rule, she was not particularly fond of the society of little girls—or, for that matter, of little boys either. They were “so very silly,” she confided to her old nurse, who still held office in the family ; and they one and all wanted to have their own way, which was a totally different way from anything that approved itself to Regina Osborne.

One Sunday afternoon, when Queenie was absorbed in a story-book that had just been given her, Mr. and Mrs. Osborne began to talk a little discursively on all sorts of subjects, and from one thing to another they passed to the consideration of the child that had been born at the same time as their own.

“Ah, my Christmas gift was a gift indeed !” said Mr. Osborne, as his eyes fell lovingly on the small figure, gracefully, yet luxuriously, coiled up among the sofa cushions. One plump little hand rested on the volume under perusal, the other was pressed against the delicately-tinted cheek and the bright curls, which were between brown and gold in hue, partly veiled the fair, thoughtful face, and partly swept the velvet against which she leaned. She made a very pretty picture, did Queenie, at that moment ; no wonder her fond father regarded her with mingled pride and affection. “But,” he resumed, after a moment’s pause, “I am afraid poor Derrington was not nearly so well satisfied with his present. He has always spoken of the child as ‘*one too many*.’”

“James was saying the other day what a melancholy-looking man he was.”

“And so he is. I really don’t know what is the matter with the fellow ; but he always gives you an idea that he is brooding over his wrongs, or finding fault with an adverse fate, or something of the kind. I have raised his salary more than once—as I think I have mentioned to you—and that purely out of compassion, for his services grow less rather than more valuable, and he certainly is not the man he was before his wife died. He seems to me to have been going down ever since ; and now he does his work steadily enough I own, but more like a machine than a sentient, living man, who takes an interest in his occupation. If he had not been an old servant, and the father of that little

Dolly that put in an appearance seven years ago next Christmas-day, I am not at all sure but that I should have got rid of him, or at least have reduced his salary, long ago."

"Poor fellow! I dare say he has a great deal at home to try him."

"I don't doubt that he has. And that reminds me that I heard a rumour that he was going to be married again."

"So much the better for him, if he only make a prudent choice. All those growing girls must need a mother. There are six of them, I think you said?"

"Yes, six; but the eldest of them must be almost grown-up, I suppose, by this time. And, now I come to think of it, he told me that the eldest—Kitty, he called her, if I remember—had been his little housekeeper ever since her mother died. He spoke of her as quite a young woman. I have always spoken to him about his family on Christmas-eve, you know, and sent a little present for his youngest born, out of compliment to Queenie there. In fact, I have, as a rule, given it in her name."

"What is it you have given in my name?" asked a soft little voice at the speaker's knee. While Mr. and Mrs. Osborne had talked the light had suddenly failed, and Queenie, closing her story-book, of which, to tell truth, she was a little weary, had listened to the subdued conversation that was going on between the two at the fireside. Gradually Queenie slid down from the sofa, and became interested in hearing about Mr. Derrington and his rather unsatisfactory ways. It was not the first time she had heard of Dolores—the little girl who was just her own age, and who had never known what it was to have a real mother. She had always heard her spoken of as "poor Dolly Derrington."

"All sorts of nice things, Pussie," returned her father, fondly stroking her fair head. "Last year I gave Miss Dolores a turkey and two golden sovereigns. I have not made up my mind yet what they are to have this Christmas."

"Does Dolly like turkey?"

"I dare say she does; most little girls like turkey, I think. The one I sent last was a fine big one, as fat and

plump as could be ; it would be enough for the whole family for dinner and for supper too."

"Dolly and I have only one birthday between us?"

"Only one. You were both born very early on the morning of Christmas-day."

"Then I do not see why we should not spend our birthday together. Dolly might come and eat some of our turkey ; we always have one, you know, and the people at her house could eat their dinner without her ; you could send them one just the same as if she was there to eat it."

"Do you want Dolly Derrington to spend Christmas-day with you, Queenie?"

"Of course, I do ; I am sure I shall like her very much. Is her name *Dorothy*, as well as mine and grandmamma's, that I never saw?"

"No ; she has a very strange name that I dare say you never heard before ; I often wonder her father let her have it—it means *sorrowful* ! She is really Dolores Derrington."

"What did they call her that for?"

"Because her poor mother died when she was born ; and because they all felt sure the poor little thing was born to pain and sorrow."

"And was she?"

"I am afraid she was. All the little girls in the world cannot be born to *felicity*—that is to say, to happiness, and to good fortune, as you were, Queenie. Your name means everything that is nice and pleasant, my little Regina, my queen of joy and prosperity—my precious gift that came to me on Christmas morning, almost seven years ago !"

"I don't see why she should not be born to happiness, too," said Queenie, thoughtfully. "Why is not everybody happy and prosperous?"

"That is more than I can tell you, pussy-cat. That is a problem far too difficult for me to solve. There must always be some rich people and some poor people ; some must be sick and sorry, some must be healthy and blithe ; some must succeed in life, and some must fail ; it takes all sorts of men and women, and little boys and girls, to make a world. I suppose Providence orders it so, though I am

not quite sure that Providence is as responsible for the unlucky ones as folks think. God gives us all opportunities, at one time or another, and some of us make use of them, and some do not ; some have a genius for climbing, and some have not ; some are careful and diligent, and some are thriftless and idle. Some 'get on' from their youth upwards, and some go down, *down*, every step they take from their cradle to their grave. And people that do not go forward—go backwards ; it is the law of life !—progression or retrogression ; no one dies exactly in the state in which he was born—it is either better or worse. But that is a little too much for you to understand, my queen ; when my little girl gets older, she will know better what father means. It is quite too soon to begin talking philosophy and political economy, as yet."

"I don't know what they are, and I don't want to know. But I do know that I want Dolly Derrington to come here on my birthday. If she is sorrowful, she wants somebody to make her happy. What did you say her real name was ? "

"*Dolores*,—it is not an English name, any more than yours is. There are not many Felicias or Reginas in this country, I am tolerably sure. I like your pet name best, my Queenie."

"So do I ; and I shall always call Dolores, *Dolly*. I don't like a name that means all sorts of disagreeable things. I should not like to be reminded of them every time somebody called me. Then I may have *Dolly* to spend Christmas-day with me ? "

"Well ! I hardly know what to answer. I am not sure that it is quite wise. What does mother say ? "

"But I *must* have her !" pleaded Queenie, half earnestly, half imperiously, and opening her beautiful violet eyes to their widest extent—for Queenie had lovely eyes that made people look at her more than once ; sometimes they were of a soft greyish blue, sometimes of a slate colour, sometimes they had a decided purple tinge, like some dark hyacinths, or the violets that fill the sweet spring air with their fragrance.

"I must have her," continued the young lady ; "you always give me everything I want on my birthday, or else

what is the use of a birthday? And why should people be born on Christmas-day, of all the days in the year, if they are not to have what they want?"

"What makes you want Dolly Derrington?" asked her mother.

"I want her because I do want her," replied Queenie, with true feminine logic. "No, that is not quite it; I want her to take some of the unhappiness out of her!—I have got lots of things: why should I not give her some? If she had everything she wished for she would not be sorrowful, would she?"

"My Queenie," said her mother, "sorrow and joy do not quite depend upon the abundance of our possessions; you will find that out for yourself when you are a dozen years older; one *may* be rich and unhappy, or poor and quite happy, my darling. It is written in the Book of books—'A man's life consisteth not in the abundance of things which he possesseth.' But it is quite right of you, dearie, to be ready to give out of your abundance—the abundance that God Himself has given you—to one who has so very much less than yourself. Let your father and myself talk it over, Queenie; you shall know to-morrow upon what we have decided."

And Queenie, though she began to protest against this, was obliged to be content. Moreover, she felt well assured that in the end everything she had asked for would be granted her.

Later on in the evening, when Queenie was gone to bed, Mr. Osborne said to his wife, "What shall we do, Chrissie, as to the child's request?"

"Why should not her wish be granted? Why should not little Dolly Derrington spend her Christmas-day with us? It would do poor Dolly no harm to taste a little pleasure of quite a different flavour from that to which she has been accustomed, and I am sure it would do our Queenie good to learn to what straits people a little less fortunate than herself may be put. I do not think one can be properly thankful for all God's mercies, if one comes to regard them as a natural consequence—as a mere matter of course. In her present prosperous condition, and seeing only those of

our friends who are equally prosperous, how will it be possible for her to say to herself—

“ ‘Not more than others I deserve,
Yet God hath given me more ! ’ ”

“That will all come as she gets older, and begins to know the world as a place that is not exactly an ‘earthly Paradise.’ I am not sure that it will be wise to allow her—such a baby as she is, too—to mix herself up with people in the Derringtons’ position. Between ourselves, I am a little afraid that poor Derrington is what we should call an ‘unlucky man.’ For the last seven years he has persistently gone down in life, and yet he has had advantages—advantages that he had certainly no right to anticipate.”

“Perhaps the disadvantages outweigh the advantages? From little hints that you have let slip it strikes me that Mrs. Derrington was the mainstay of the family—her husband’s right hand. Not very much judgment, not much discretion can be expected from a girl so young as Miss Derrington must be. I dare say she has been able to keep house pretty decently, and I have no doubt she has done her best to be a mother to poor little Dolly; but a daughter can never exercise the same influence—wield the same power, if you do not think that too strong an expression—as a wife can and should. Unless a girl arrogates to herself a control that she ought not to possess, she can scarcely hope to be the guiding star of a man who is so weak and so spiritless as I am afraid this Mr. Derrington is. Even if the father were unworthy, which I gather from you he is not, there is no reason why we should visit his sins upon the head of his unfortunate child. If Queenie wishes to show her a little kindness, why should she not?”

“Why should she not, indeed? Only that I am afraid no good ever comes of mixing up diverging conditions. Derrington seems to me like a man on whose brow ‘*failure*’ is written. I have known him for I hardly know how many years, and he has not got on in the least. Even when a stronger hand has pushed him on in spite of himself, he has fallen back directly the inspiring hold was withdrawn. No; Derrington will never do any abiding good for himself,

and, consequently, none for those who are luckless enough to come after him. 'There's nae luck about the house' might be written on his front door, I am afraid; as well as on the front door of a majority of the population who are not born with silver spoons in their mouths, nor born down in the depths, either. It is the middle class who chiefly hold their own fate in their hands, I am convinced."

"Just so. But what shall I say to Queenie when I go up to her, as I shall presently? I know she will be wide awake waiting to hear what we have settled, though I did say the answer would be given to-morrow."

"Well, we seldom refuse Queenie anything, do we, especially anything on which her heart is set? And though I scarcely like the idea of the two children being brought together—for I don't want to be mixed up with the unlucky Derringtons any further—I hardly see how we are to disappoint our pet on her birthday; we have never done such a thing before."

"No, never; and I really think we had better indulge her in this case. It is just one of Queenie's fancies, and she will begin to fret if she is thwarted. If we do not take to little Dolly the intimacy need not be encouraged. Have you ever seen her?"

"Never. But Rachel has, though not since she was quite a little thing. I scarcely fancy she will be *vulgar*; there is not the slightest vulgarity about poor Derrington, in spite of a certain abject manner that puts me out of all patience with him continually. Then, shall we agree that Queenie is to have her visitor?"

"I have no objection to offer; Queenie will have her wish, and poor little Dolores will have a happy time. There is only one thing—the Derringtons may not care to have their home circle broken up at Christmas, and the little girl taken away to spend her birthday elsewhere? Fancy, if Queen Victoria took it into her head to invite our Queenie for the 25th, we should not take it as such a very great favour."

"Indeed, we should not. But the cases are by no means parallel, Chrissie; though I don't know but that we *might* feel inclined to let the child go and dine with the Princesses

at Windsor Castle, because it would probably be so very much for her own good, you see. We should not like to stand in the darling's way, should we, dear? But as regards Derrington himself, I really think he will not miss Dolly at all; he has never been very fond of the child, I am sure. He seems, somehow—though it does seem too preposterous—to hold her accountable for what happened seven years ago. And I am not sure, but I think I have heard him say that she was not a lovable child. I do not suppose he will make any demur about her coming to us for the day; and of course the turkey and the other little things will not be missing because she is.”

“Of course not! I am glad you remember the Derringtons on Christmas-day, my dear; I think I shall send them some mince-pies, to go with the turkey.”

“Do so, Chrissie; and you might fill up the hamper—for of course there will be a hamper—with a few apples and oranges, and such like trifles. Fruit is always acceptable where there is a lot of children. Dear me, how fond I was of figs and almonds and raisins when I was a little lad, and used to wish I might be turned loose into a fruiterer's shop! You must let Queenie choose what is to go in the basket, for it will be her present, remember.”

“Certainly; though I may have to put an embargo on some of the proposed contents. She may suggest things she herself appreciates, but which will not be quite as acceptable to her poor friends as to herself. But there can be no harm in including a good large cake—a cut-and-come-again sort of commodity, you know—among the Christmas gifts, and it would be quite to our Queenie's mind.”

“She is a generous little soul, our one little jewel of a daughter; there is not a scrap of the ‘dog-in-the-manger’ in her disposition, I am thankful to say. Indeed, our children are all liberal-minded; there is not a curmudgeon among them; and I am equally glad to know that there is not one of them at all likely to play the *rôle* of a spend-thrift.”

“It would be strange, indeed, if any of our children were to evince a tendency to parsimony or to extravagance; you have always set them such an excellent example. Now

I am going up to give my pet her good-night kiss, and I shall tell her that she may have Dolly Derrington to spend Christmas-day with her, if Dolly's own people make no objection."

CHAPTER IV.

A MUTUAL BIRTHDAY.

NOBODY in Dorchester Street making the slightest opposition to Dolores forming one of the festal circle at "The Acacias" on Christmas-day, it was decided that the visit was to be paid, Mr. Osborne himself promising that the brougham should be sent to Brixton for little Miss Derrington's sole benefit. For Mr. Osborne kept a brougham of his own now, though at the time of Queenie's birth he had not felt himself justified in setting up his carriage, being well content to avail himself of the public accommodation, which, even thirty years ago, was so convenient between Clapham and the City. And Mrs. Osborne wrote a little note to the eldest Miss Derrington requesting her acceptance of the hamper, which was despatched a full week before Christmas, and which contained not only the orthodox turkey, but a glorious collection of fruits and confections intended for the delectation of the whole family.

Queenie slept in an airy dressing-room adjoining the parental chamber ; she was far too precious to be delegated to the care of confidential servants. Even old Nurse, who had charge of Philip till he was quite a big boy in jacket and trousers, was not considered trustworthy enough, or discreet enough, or vigilant enough, to be the sole guardian of Miss Regina through the hours of darkness. Her mother always looked at her treasure the last thing before she lay down in her own bed ; and if either parent awoke in the night, a visit was sure to be paid to the little room, the door of which was never shut.

Consequently, Queenie frequently made an early call upon her father and mother when they could well have dispensed with the premature disturbance ; in the summer mornings she and the sun sometimes invaded their chamber together, and she, though bright enough in her parents' partial estimation, was not, as a rule, nearly so quiet as the sunbeams. In the winter, when the mornings were at the darkest, Queenie was there betimes ; so the tardy dawn of that Christmas-day, which she had anticipated with so much fervour, was ushered in by the young lady announcing herself at a rather untimely hour, and proffering her greetings in no very subdued voice.

"A happy, happy Christmas, dear mother ; a very, very happy, beautiful Christmas to you, father dear !—and, oh ! what do you think Santa Claus has brought me ? "

Seeing that Mr. and Mrs. Osborne had enacted the part of Santa Claus with their own loving hands, while Queenie lay in her cosy sleep, not many hours before, they had not so much trouble in conjecturing as might have been the case had they known less of the generosity of that delightful and always welcome saint, who takes French leave to invade people's houses once a year. Moreover, neither Chrissie nor her husband had retired at eight o'clock the evening before, the mother, especially, finding various little things to attend to, requiring personal supervision, till midnight struck, and then, just as her eyes were closing, the *waits* arrived on the broad gravel before the house, and discoursed solemn music for about the space of half-an-hour.

Mr. Osborne awoke first, and was consequently the first to return his daughter's greetings. "All Christmas blessings to you, my own Queenie, and many, *many* happy returns of your birthday ! Don't wake poor mother, for she was dreadfully tired when she came to bed last night. I dare say she is dreaming about you ; let her dream on a little longer ; it is very early, Queenie."

"No, father, not early, though it is dark yet. I heard the church clock strike *six* ever so long ago. It is almost time to get up, isn't it ? "

"Well, dearie, the servants are not stirring, I think, and the rooms will be dark and cold, and there will be no

breakfast ready. But how did you find out what Santa Claus had brought you ? ”

“ Oh, I climbed upon a chair and turned up the gas, so that I could see very well. And Santa Claus must have known exactly what I most wished for, for there are the very things I wanted for my doll’s-house, besides a work-basket, and the loveliest coloured almonds, and a bag, and a picture-book, and an amber necklace, and ever so many things that would not go into my stocking. It was one of my new scarlet ones, and I wanted to hang up one of yours, because it was nice and big, and would hold more ; but mother said if I laid a quite clean white cloth on the little table near my bed the last thing, it would do quite as well, for Santa Claus was never very particular when one’s birthday came together with Christmas-day. And, father, I am seven years old to-day.

“ So you are, my precious one ; a thousand blessings on the day that brought you to us. It was the happiest Christmas-day of our lives.”

“ And nurse says none of my brothers, not even James, was born on Christmas-day in the morning. I am so glad I was, daddy ; I wonder whether Dolly is as glad as I am to be a Christmas child. We have but one birthday between us, you know. I wonder if Santa Claus has been to her house. I wonder if she is awake now ? ”

“ I dare say she is fast asleep, Queenie. Little girls ought not to be stirring before the daylight comes, and waking up poor tired fathers and mothers. And listen !—mother is awake. I was afraid our chattering, for all we spoke in whispers, would rouse her.”

“ I am sure it is quite time she was roused,” quoth Miss Regina, sagaciously. “ Why, it must be seven o’clock ! We have been in bed a great many hours. Let me give you a sweet kiss, mother ; you were asleep when I wished you a happy Christmas, and father said, a ‘ *sh / sh /* ’ for fear I should wake you. But you are awake now, mammy dear. I am so glad ; I don’t like talking under my breath on my birthday ; it tires me.”

“ Yes ; I am awake, dear pet, now ; and mother is wishing her Queenie all good and happy things. Queenie her-

self was the best and most precious Christmas gift that mother ever had."

"Did Santa Claus bring me, mother?"

"No, my child, Santa Claus brings all sorts of lovely things, but he did not bring you; the good God gave *you* to me, Queenie."

"Then, of course, He gave Dolly Derrington to her father and mother, for we came both together. And that reminds me that I must get up, for I have a great deal to do before Dolly comes. Is not nurse calling me?"

"I think she is. I dare say your bath is ready."

"Of course it is; I told nurse last night I might have it very early this morning, for I should be ever so busy before breakfast. I suppose Dolly will bring her doll, so the doll's house must be quite fit to receive visitors."

And Queenie was as busy as a bee, almost before she was dressed; and at breakfast-time came a series of surprises—many presents from her brothers, and one, a very costly one, from the old lady that called herself "Aunt Jemima." This gift was laid at the bottom, under all the others, and it was contained in a well-preserved morocco case, which, when opened, disclosed a soft, white velvet lining, and a *parure* of beautiful sapphires in very old-fashioned setting, securely reposing thereon. Queenie screamed with delight, and would have arrayed herself in them there and then, only the bracelets were too large for her little wrists, and the necklace for her neck, and the brooch had lost its pin; and the earrings could not at present assume their proper position, for the very good reason that the little lady's ears were, as yet, exactly as God had made them. But she was very much delighted, and she quite understood that they were extremely valuable, and would be even more beautiful when, in due time, they came back from the jewellers', after being cleaned and re-set in the very newest fashion; for it was explained to her that little girls never wore jewels, and that they would be kept safely for her till such time as she should be a grown-up young lady, fit to be introduced into society.

"The commencement of your jewel casket, my queen," said her father, as he replaced the sapphires in their snowy nest; "you are a lucky little lady to have such gems in your

possession at seven years of age ; these sapphires are worth a great deal of money, Queenie. Aunt Jemima always said they should be yours. Her godmother gave them to her when she was a girl, and that is a great many years ago. She wore them *once*, she told me, at her first ball, and never since. They must be entirely reset before Queenie wears them, mother."

"Certainly they must ; but it will be ten years or more before Queenie is ready for them ; girls should never wear jewels before they are *out*."

"I am out every day, except when it rains, or I have a bad cold," remarked Miss Osborne ; "and I thought you said it was vulgar to wear ornaments out of doors, mother?"

"So it is, my pet ; you will have too much taste ever to do anything of the kind, I am persuaded. But there is another way of being '*out*,' which you will understand some day ; it means your being old enough to go out to parties, and to leave off learning lessons."

"Oh," said Queenie, profoundly, "then I wish I could be '*out*' directly, for I very often hate to learn my lessons, and going to grown-up parties must be very pleasant. I did so enjoy the Mansion House juvenile ball ; the Lady Mayoress looked like—like a fairy queen ! and she was so kind. I wonder if Dolly ever went to the Mansion House, father?"

"Probably not, Queenie. But if you do not drink your coffee it will be cold. Finish your breakfast, and then I have something else to show you."

"Another birthday present?"

"Yes, you fortunate little girl ; a present that you will like, I should not wonder, best of all !"

As indeed she did. For this present was from a kind old bachelor in the neighbourhood, who, having plenty of money, and no little boys or girls of his own, very often pleased himself by sending gifts to other people's children ; and he had seen Queenie on the common, riding her donkey, and he had taken a great fancy to her, as well as to her mother, who reminded him, he said, of a young lady to whom he was once engaged to be married, and who died quite fifty years ago.

The old gentleman's contribution to Miss Osborne's birthday offerings was one that would have rejoiced the heart of any little girl, and Queenie went into raptures straightway over her new possession as soon as ever it was displayed to her.

"Why, it is *splendid*!" she exclaimed; "a great deal nicer than the sapphires! There was never anything in the world half so delicious!"

"*It*" was neither more nor less than a miniature tea-service, just fit for the use and delectation of a juvenile assembly. The cups and saucers, and all the paraphernalia, were of delicate Worcester china, "hand painted," as Queenie was duly informed; and the fairy spoons and the liliputian sugar-tongs were of genuine silver, exquisitely chased. Queenie forgot the sapphires that were to be kept for her till she was grown up, in her delight over this charming present, that could be brought into use that very day! For she bargained for pouring out tea for herself and Dolly that afternoon, and cook was to make tiny teacakes fit for the occasion, and the lovely sugar-basin was to be filled, and the lovely cream-jug was to be replenished with real cream, and the tea in the pretty china teapot was not to be weak, wishy-washy stuff, such as is generally given to children, but real "*grown-up tea*;"—that is to say, tea strong enough for consumption of grown-up people.

Then Queenie had to display all her new possessions to the servants, and to be complimented thereon, and congratulated on her birthday; and then it was high time to think of the visitor who was to arrive at The Acacias quite early in the day. And just at the last Queenie elected to go with Nurse in the carriage to fetch Dolly from her house. Her mother demurred a little at the proposal, but the child gained the victory as usual, and drove away, radiant with animation, in the direction of Brixton, which, as everybody knows, is not a hundred miles from Clapham Common.

But then, neighbourhoods very near together may yet present divers features, and even the same neighbourhood may differ the one part from the other; and Queenie was borne away into a region with which she was entirely unacquainted. Nurse said it was more

Kennington than Brixton, and by no means the best specimen of either.

"What an ugly street!" exclaimed Queenie, as they left the broad thoroughfare behind them, and turned into what seemed to be a wilderness of dull, shabby little houses, one precisely like another, except here and there at corners, where the front parlours had been superseded by a humble shop, or, worse still, had been turned into the bar of a public-house. "Dolly does not live here, surely?"

"Yes, she does, Miss Regina; this is Dorchester Street, and fifty-nine is the number; we are almost there now. Mind you don't say anything not quite polite; perhaps the little girl would be hurt, for it is her home; she was born here, and I dare say likes it as well as you like 'The Acacias.'"

"Oh, she can't!" said Miss Regina, decisively; "but I will take care, Nurse."

At that moment the carriage drew up before the mean entrance of "fifty-nine." There was no mistake, for a black, staring 59 was painted conspicuously on the door-post. Nurse alighted, and bade her young lady sit still in the brougham—Miss Derrington would be ready directly. Queenie occupied herself in criticising the house, which she thought was very small, very shabby, and doubtless very uncomfortable, while she watched eagerly for Dolly's advent. What would she be like? Must she not be miserable, living in such a dreary, dismal hole?

Presently the narrow door which had admitted Nurse opened again, and an elderly, grey-haired man appeared, leading by the hand a dark-eyed, solemn-faced little girl. With a grave obeisance, which Queenie flattered herself might have been bestowed upon a grown-up lady, this personage, whom she at once understood to be Mr. Derrington, deposited Dolly on the softly-cushioned seat, and, with another bow, silently retreated. Two girls, who seemed to be about twelve and fourteen, assisted Nurse to take her place inside the carriage, and one of them cried, as she regained her own threshold, "Good-bye, Dolly; mind you behave yourself."

Dolly uttered no word, but looked very much as if she

might be on her way to execution. Nurse had wondered, all along, whether the visit would be an unmixed pleasure to either of the children, and something like a doubt crossed Queenie's mind as to the success of her bold venture. The gush of welcome she had quite intended to bestow upon her guest was subdued; poor little Dolly was evidently on the verge of tears, and could only reply, when addressed, "Very well, thank you, Miss Osborne; very well, thank you, ma'am." For she had been studiously enjoined on no account to forget her "manners," and her sisters, innocently enough, had done their very best to make the poor little maiden painfully shy and frightened. And Dolly's embarrassment communicated itself somewhat to free-and-easy Queenie, who, for the first time in her young life, found herself at a loss how to begin a conversation. Dolly was not like any little girl she had ever met before; she had such big black eyes, and such a sallow skin; then she was very thin—so thin, that her young hostess pitied her leanness, and determined to ply her with all the good things to be found at "The Acacias." Involuntarily she regarded her meagre guest with profound compassion.

"Here we are," cried Queenie, suddenly recovering her spirits, as the brougham turned into the drive; "and there's mother looking for us. And that's my brother Philip; he will help us out."

Nurse could see that poor Dolly Derrington was almost too nervous to see either the house or the people that came to welcome her; but she held out her little bony hand—very poorly gloved for a winter-day—and responded in set phrase, and in a husky undertone, to the greetings of Mr. and Mrs. Osborne.

"Keep within call, but let the children amuse themselves as they choose in the nursery," said Chrissie, when, with her now kind motherly hands she had taken off Dolly's outer garments, and smoothed her lank, dark locks, that were as nearly black as they could be, without quite rivalling the raven's wing in hue. "Take them in plenty of cake, and some lemonade—or a little hot coffee if they would like it better. It is a very chilly morning, and we shall not dine before three o'clock."

Left to themselves, the children began to make friends, as children in their circumstances generally do. Under the influence of delicious pound cake, dainty tongue-sandwich, well-sugared warm coffee, and a box of bon-bons, combined with the attractions of the most wonderful doll's-house that the world ever displayed, Dolly began to thaw, and at last her tongue was unloosed, and she could talk quite freely.

When they had made a most satisfactory repast, and the dolls' rooms and furniture, their kitchen and culinary utensils, had all been examined, the girls flung themselves down on a luxurious fleecy rug, before a comfortable fire, and, as Queenie said, made themselves "beautifully cosy."

"Can you always do just as you like in this large, nice room? and can you play with these lovely things whenever you like?" asked Dolly, looking wistfully at the table and the floor strewn with a variety of expensive toys.

"Oh, certainly," replied Queenie; "it is my nursery—my very own room, where I may make as much noise and litter as I like. Of course, one has to behave properly and keep quiet in the drawing-room and dining-room, and in the library and the boys' study. They are very fussy sometimes—worse, a great deal, than father and mother when they don't want to be disturbed—though they can make plenty of racket, and talk loud enough if it pleases themselves."

"And do you live in this fine house always?"

"To be sure I do; it is my *home*, you know. One lives at home, I suppose, whether it is big or little, or nice or nasty."

"Yes, I suppose so," acquiesced Dolly, with a long-drawn, quivering sigh, "You wouldn't like to live where I live, though. You could put all our upstairs rooms into this one, I am certain, and downstairs is as bad. Papa"—she pronounced it *pap-pa*—"says you couldn't swing a cat in our best parlour; and Kitty and Nellie say we should be squeezed out into the street if it wasn't for the kitchens—though they are little enough and very dark."

"Dear me!" quoth Queenie, "how extremely disagreeable! You have not many servants, then?"

"Oh, no—not any."

"Not any?"

"No. We had one once; but sisters thought she was more plague than profit, and she ate a great deal and made the weekly bills mount up. Kitty is always put about when the bills run up, you know. We put nearly all the washing out now, and we have a woman in—Mrs. Cox—on Saturday mornings, and we get on quite as well without a girl as with one, and a great deal better, for we save her keep, of course; and pap-pa says Kitty and Nellie ought to be doing something for themselves. I think they do a great deal; they never get cleaned-up till quite afternoon."

"*Cleaned-up?* Are they ever dirty, then? When I am as old as your Kitty and Nellie, I know mother will see that I am just as nice and tidy for breakfast as for late dinner; and I shall have handsome dresses, and wear my sapphires, and make calls, and go out to dances—father said so only this morning. Is your *pap-pa* your father?"

"Yes, I believe he is; but we never call him that. The new people at the shop sometimes say, 'tell your father-potatoes have risen.'"

"And why does your father want to swing the cat? I saw a very cruel boy on the common, one day, swinging round a poor cat by its tail, and Nurse said she would give him a cat with *nine tails*, if she had her way! I think she meant he should be flogged. Does your father *ever* swing a cat?"

"No, no—don't you understand? It means that the room is too little to turn round in! Pap-pa would not hurt anything, I am sure."

"I am glad of that; but do call him 'father.' And if I were you—all of you, of course—I would get into a larger house. There can be no room for your dolls even; and that reminds me, why didn't you bring your best doll with you?"

"I never thought of it; besides, it has no proper clothes, and its nose is broken—Annie hammered it for fun; and one leg is off. But I do love it—poor old thing."

"Why, it cannot be of much use!"

"It goes to bed with me, and I cover it up when it is cold, and I make pretence to take it out riding in a grand

carriage. I have had it a very long time ; the lady at the public-house gave it me, when I was quite a little girl."

"You shall have one of mine. I have more than I know what to do with. You may choose the one you like best, except that one in a pink satin dress, or that one with real curls, or that one just like a living baby. I should not like to part with those. Choose one, dear, and we'll christen it after dinner, and it shall be your own—dress, and hat, and all—for ever."

Rather timidly, and not overjoyed at the idea of "Annabella" being deposed in favour of a well-dressed, fashionable lady, Dolly, after a little hesitation, chose a medium-sized "Mary Jane," neatly but plainly dressed, and considered by Queenie to be only fit for a housemaid to the grander members of her numerous doll family.

A good many more presents followed, chiefly in the shape of discarded toys. The housemaid-doll was christened afresh, and endued with more sumptuous raiment. Indeed she had quite a liberal wardrobe when, as "Florinda," she went away with her new mistress at nine o'clock that evening, together with a toy chest of drawers, a musical box, an old coral necklace of Queenie's, a store of canvas and Berlin wool, and "lots" of bonbons, and a handful of what are now called *cosaques*.

"*Queenie* is the right name for you!" said Dolly, while Nurse was tying on her bonnet, as the last performance of that never-to-be-forgotten day. "Pap-pa—I mean *father*—said you were born the Queen of Happiness, and the *favourite of fortune*."

"That is just what the maids said this morning when I showed them my presents—sapphires, and tea-things, and all, and cook said, 'You must have a fairy godmother, Miss Regina!' And Nurse said, 'No; she never had a godmother at all; for *we* don't hold with any such things; but she is Fortune's own child, and the Fairy Queen's particular favourite!'"

CHAPTER V.

IMPENDING DISCIPLINE.

“**M**OTHER, I wonder what Dolly is doing?” said Miss Osborne one windy day in March, when mother and nurse had simultaneously agreed that it was far too breezy for out-door exercise of any kind. The wild blast swept the wide deserted common from end to end, and the surface of the Mount Pool was all over tiny breakers ; clouds of dust careered along the broad road, where, in summer time the patient donkeys were wont to stand waiting to be hired ; the large trees were straining and creaking before the gale ; and a deep roar, like the sound of the sea, filled all the air about the comfortable, substantially-built mansions, of which “The Acacias” was one of the most comfortable. “Mother, I should so like just to go into Dorchester Street, and see what Dolly is doing with Florinda.”

“My darling,” replied Mrs. Osborne, “such a journey is not to be thought of. It is blowing a perfect hurricane, and we should not be quite safe from loose tiles and chimney-pots. Besides, the dust is dreadful.”

“But it would not come into the brougham, would it ? We could keep the windows close shut, you know, and there is that beautiful new rug, all over tails, that father bought when the weather was so cold.”

“We could not keep the dust out, dear, any more than the keen east wind that will blow in everywhere. And poor Thomas would grumble sadly, I am afraid, if we took him all the way to Brixton for our pleasure when his rheumatism is so bad. Father means to come home by the omnibus on purpose to spare him and the horses.”

“But, mother, I want to go and see Dolly to-day—oh, I do *want*, so very much ! Can’t you let me go ? Why should not nurse and I take a cab from the rank at the end of the Balham-road ; the east wind and the dust cannot hurt common cab-drivers.”

"Nevertheless, my Queenie, I must not let you venture. What would father say if you caught cold and brought back that troublesome cough of yours that we were half afraid was turning out to be whooping-cough? Besides, I am not at all sure that father would wish you to be going again to Dorchester Street so soon."

"*So soon?* Why, it must be more than a whole year since Christmas-day!"

"Scarcely three months, my dear; we are only in the middle of March. The chestnut-trees will have to be in bloom again, and the limes in blossom, and the leaves will have to bud and cast their full shade upon the grass, and to fade, and fall, and rustle in the autumn breeze before we come to the close of another year. This is but the beginning of spring, my Queenie."

"Is that all? Dear me, how slowly time goes—I wish the days *would* go faster! I am so tired of all my dolls; I think I must have a new one, or else some new furniture for their rooms. And, oh, mother, I saw such lovely little pots and kettles, and a *real* gridiron, the other day at the ironmonger's in High Street; there was a whole box full of things—saucepans with lids to them, and a coal-scuttle—a *copper one*!—and there was a proper knife-tray, just like the one cook keeps her knives in downstairs. I must have that, I think; and Dolly must come again, and we can play at giving a large dinner party."

"Well, dear, we will see about it; and we will ask father if he has any objection to our going to Dorchester Street."

"Why should he have any objection? Dolly is very nice, and I like her ever so much—far more than I like little Miss Courtnay or Cissy and Louisa Templeton. I want her for my very own friend—and I do so like to have what I want, mother dear."

"That is a liking common to most of us, I think, Queenie, darling; we will see about it."

"You always say you 'will see about it,'" quoth Queenie, not at all too amiably; "it takes ever such a time to 'see about' things, and one has to *wait*. It is horrid to have to wait."

"And yet, dearie, it is what we all have to do through

life. And if father and I could give you everything in the world the very moment you fancy it, I am not sure that it would be good for you. I am afraid poor Dolly very often has to wait for what she wants, or, worse still, go without it altogether."

"I am afraid she has," and Queenie shook her wise little head very seriously. "You can't think how horrid Dorchester Street is! It isn't fit to live in; there's a common green-grocer's close by, and a public-house at the corner, and the house itself is not as big as our coachman's house. And I saw two of Dolly's sisters—quite big girls, and so shabby!—and there were no curtains in the window, and only one little mess of a step into the hall. And such a hall! not wider than your little sofa-table; and the door-scraper was just a piece of old rusty iron, I do believe. It was dreadful."

"Well, my Queenie, be thankful that God has given you so much more comfortable a home. You might have been born in Dorchester Street; you might have had to live in poky little rooms, if God had sent you to Mr. and Mrs. Derrington, instead of to your own father and mother."

"I suppose He might, but I am very glad that He did not. Nurse says God orders everybody's lot—poor people as well as rich people, just the same—and I suppose He does; the minister said something like it last Sunday. But, oh, mother dear, are you not glad you had me your own self?"

"Very glad, my darling. It was very good of the dear God to give me a little daughter of my very own, and I often thank Him for the precious gift; and you must thank Him, my pet, for your happy, peaceful home, and for all the pleasant and nice things that are all day, and every day, about you."

"Mother!" and Queenie's large blue eyes shone with intense feeling, "if God had sent me to Dorchester Street instead of 'The Acacias,' I should have *died*. I never could have lived in such a wretched place. You never saw such a hole, for it is not worth calling a house; and what do you think? Dolly said they kept no servants, not even one. And the rooms were so small that you could not *swing a cat* in any of them—that meant that you could

hardly turn round in them. And till I gave her Florinda she had actually no doll, except a poor broken thing that was only fit to throw into the fire. I wonder if she has burned *Annabella*, as she called the old wooden thing? I expect not, because she said she loved it, and took it to bed at night, and covered it up from the cold."

"Did she? Do you know, Queenie, I like Dolly all the better for loving her shabby old doll. But, my dear, I do not think you would have *died* of living in Dorchester Street if you had never known any better home. There are many homes far worse than the Derringtons'; and worse still—far worse—there are unfortunate children who have no home at all."

"No home at all! Then where do they live?"

"God knows, my dear. They can scarcely be said to *live* at all in our sense of the word, though they are alive. And they are hungry and thirsty, and they feel the cold, and they want shelter at night, just as happier children do."

"But how can they keep alive without food and clothes, and nice warm beds to lie down on? I don't think the world can be such a nice place after all; and if God is good, why does He let people be badly off?"

"I cannot answer that question, Queenie dear. I wonder myself sometimes why things are as they are, and why *I* should be chosen to have so many good things, and to be so comfortable and prosperous while far better people are left to struggle with poverty. I can only tell myself that God is wiser and kinder a thousand times than I can even guess, and that He always does just what is best, although we may not see it, or understand it at the time."

"Then the hymn is true when it says—

" 'Not more than others I deserve,
Yet God has given me more.' "

Well, mother, I never thought much about it, though when I went into Dorchester Street on Christmas-day I did think it was not quite fair that one little girl should have heaps of things and the other almost nothing. Then what a poor little frock she had on, ever so thin and old-fashioned. It

was made out of one that her bigger sister had done with, she told me, and she had no furs, and only a plain straw bonnet trimmed with common red ribbon. And to think of having no servant at all, and going out on errands ! Why, Dolly told me she often went to the shop—she talked just as if there were only one shop in all Brixton—to fetch a loaf. I wonder why the Derringtons' baker cannot call for orders as ours does. What is the good of tradesmen if not to come round with their carts regularly, and bring you just what you want ?”

“My dear, daily life is carried on by different people in different ways ; things are made much easier for those who have plenty of money.”

“And we have plenty of money, haven't we ?”

“Yes ; we have *comparatively* plenty—if you understand. The Derringtons would think themselves immensely rich, I suppose, if they had our income ; while others would think themselves very well off if they had as much to spend as the Derringtons. Then, again, there are people who would feel themselves quite poor if they were no richer than we are—I could tell you of people who have many thousands a-year more than we have ; but then they want it all, because they have been accustomed always to spend more.”

“I see, though I don't *quite* understand. But, mammy, I think God must like things to be a little fairer than they are ; and if we all, who are not too poor, did what we could to help those who have but very little, don't you think it would be nice, and make things pleasanter for all the rest of the world ?”

“Bless you, darling ! that is exactly what we should try to do. There was a woman in the Bible, you know, of whom the Lord Jesus said, ‘*she hath done what she could,*’—and higher praise no one could look for. You shall give Dolly Derrington some fresh playthings, if you like ; or, better still, you shall give her a pretty new frock, that will be useful to her as the weather gets warmer.”

“That will be nice ! let us go to-morrow and buy it ; and it must be very pretty, and not too thick when the winter is over. Now, mother, you will ‘see about it’ directly, won't you ? I am sure Dolly ought not to have to wait for

her frock, for the old one must be quite worn out by this time."

"I'll talk to your father about it to-night, dear. Men do not always see things in precisely the same light as their wives and daughters do. And now I have something to tell you, Queenie; something is going to happen that I think and hope you will like very much—something that will make the time pass a little less slowly."

"Oh, what is it? Are we going to Ilfracombe again?"

"Not yet. The seaside is pleasantest in the summer-time. You are going to have *a governess*!"

"A nasty, tiresome governess! Oh, I can't—*I won't*! Why, I shall be always in disgrace; Margaret Courtnay is always getting into trouble—she told me so. And I should have no time to play with my dolls—and it would be of no use to buy the pots and kettles and the gridiron I told you about. And she would be horribly disagreeable—governesses always are, you know."

"Not always, Queenie; there are some very nice governesses, though I must say I should not care for you to have one like Margaret Courtnay's. Do you never think, my little girl, that you will be growing up before long, and that it is quite time that you began to learn a great many things. A young lady is not so much better off than a poor girl if she do not take pains to study and to learn various things. People in life are judged much more by what they know and by what they can do than by what they really possess. Besides, you will enjoy what you have far better if you understand more."

"I shall *hate* the governess!" replied Queenie, with a morose expression on her fair face. "I may as well give all my dolls to Dolly Derrington at once before she comes, for I shall have no time for anything but lessons. Why can't I go on as I have done ever so long? I read to you, and I write my copy every day, and I practise my scale and my two tunes. And nurse is teaching me to sew, and to say a great many hymns; isn't that enough?"

"No, dear. Don't cry now, and vex poor mother. Your lessons are all very well so far as they go, but they are not quite so regular as they might be, I am afraid."

You are quite old enough to learn a little every day—only *a little*, mind ; and you know you are very often tired of your dolls and your other playthings, and you wish time would not go so slowly. Now, I am pretty sure, Queenie, you will like your governess very much when you come to know her well ; she is a pleasant young lady, and sweet-tempered ; we should never let one who was not come into the house.”

“Is she pretty ? For I know I could not learn anything from an ugly person ; ugly people are always cross.”

“Not always, dear ; and a really nice, good person is never altogether ugly. There are two kinds of ugliness, my Queenie—one comes of bad tempers and selfishness indulged, and such a kind is indeed to be avoided ; but another sort may be the result of plain features, and perhaps bad complexion, but if the so-called ugly person is kind and cheerful and amiable, it is surprising how soon we forget about the plainness, and we come to think she is rather good-looking than otherwise. Now Miss Middlemore is not particularly pretty, but she is by no means plain ; I should not wonder if you call her *beautiful* when you have known her a little while. But if you do not like the idea of a governess at home, suppose we send you to school ?”

“Oh, that would be a thousand times worse ! You didn’t mean a boarding-school, though ?”

“I might mean one. There is Sutton House, across the Common, you know ; and there are a great many little girls there, and I am sure they look very happy. Would you like to go there, Queenie ?”

“How unkind of you, mother ; you know I should *die* if I went away from you and father ! No, I won’t go to school, not even like Annie and Mary Bishop do, every morning. And I don’t want a governess to make me miserable ; I shall do very well as I am, and I’ll learn a little bit more, and practice twice a day, if you like—if you’ll only go on teaching me your own self, mother.”

And Miss Regina relapsed into tears, and “wept a little weep,” that was very distressing to her loving mother to witness. Happily, Mr. Osborne was not present to behold

the effect of the anticipated *régime* for which he had desired his wife to prepare wilful little Queenie; or it is not improbable he would have been inclined there and then to put off the evil day, and inform Miss Middlemore by the next post that he and Mrs. Osborne had reconsidered their decision, and wished to defer for a few weeks longer the commencement of the engagement. For Queenie's blue eyes, swimming with tears, always won the victory where her father was concerned. As it was it took some little time to console her, and she had exacted from her mother sundry promises before she could be prevailed upon to dry her eyes and prepare for dinner.

Left alone, Mrs. Osborne resigned herself to meditation, wondering, rather sadly, whether she really was doing her very best to bring up her darling in the way she should go. Her own early life had been of a far different complexion; she had been born and brought up on the old system, which represses self-will, and enforces discipline; she had a dim suspicion that a little more firmness than she herself possessed was essential to the training of a child in her little Queenie's position.

She was still debating the question, when her sister-in-law, Mrs. Fairfax, was announced; and the conversation very naturally reverted to Queenie as soon as the two ladies were comfortably settled at their needlework. The mother told her little difficulties, for both she and her husband entertained rather a high opinion of Aunt Rachel's sagacity. Had they acted wisely, or otherwise, in engaging Miss Middlemore to undertake Queenie's education?

Mrs. Fairfax pondered the question, and rubbed her nose a little, as was her wont, before she answered, "Have you acted wisely? Well, that is more than I can take upon myself to say, for I never saw Miss Middlemore in my life. But of course you and Jonathan would satisfy yourselves as to her character and qualifications before you actually engaged her? She comes, I suppose, with the usual testimonials?"

"Oh, yes! her credentials are everything that could be wished. My doubts are touching Queenie herself; she does not take very kindly to the idea, Rachel."

"I dare say not ; Queenie is a spoilt child, Chrissie ; and if you don't take care, she'll give you the heartache some day."

"Oh, Rachel, don't say that. The child is petted, I know. How could it be otherwise, coming to us, as she did, after we had given up all hopes of a girl-baby ? And, really, I think you are quite as silly as we are—if, indeed, there is any silliness amongst us. Queenie is a sweet-tempered little soul, and so generous."

"Yes ; she is naturally of an amiable disposition, and giving away with both hands seems to be a part of her very nature—provided, that is, that she is not required to give up something she has set her heart upon for herself. I don't think, Chrissie, that generosity consists in giving away just what you don't want for yourself."

"She has liberal ideas, however, you must confess, Rachel. There is nothing of stinginess in her character ; and even a child gives some evidences of future principles."

"No ; Queenie is not a little curmudgeon, and never will be. Only——"

"Only what, Rachel ? What is there so defective in my poor Queenie ?"

"I didn't say there was anything defective, Chrissie ; the child is a good child, and a nice child, and one of the prettiest children I ever met. But I do think she is made of a little too much consequence. She has her own way, always—sooner or later ; she has no idea of meeting with a denial. I don't know what she would say or think, poor little soul, if she found herself actually thwarted."

"Well, why should she be thwarted ?"

"It is good for everybody to be thwarted sometimes. Yes, indeed ; it does not answer for anybody to be *always* considered. Chrissie, forgive me, but I must tell you that you—and Jonathan, too—are sadly inclined to bring her up as the spoiled child of prosperity. If she were not so sweet-tempered and so warm-hearted a little thing, the danger would not be so great."

"How ? I should have thought that natural goodness would prove the very best safeguard ?"

"And, to some extent, it may. But don't you see, Chrissie, that one is obliged to discipline a naughty child? and little chastisements are inevitable in most families. Why, my Tom and Walter were the best boys in the world, but they always wanted a little setting to rights now and then. Just a little judicious check is salutary, take my word for it."

"Ah, you are only used to boys; and very well your boys have turned out, I must say. But, Rachel, you have never had a girl, and boys and girls need very different management, I can assure you."

"Well, I dare say you are right, and I am sure I don't want to find fault with your system—or want of system, rather. Queenie is a dear little girl, and I am not sure that I should not take up the cudgels in her defence, if even you found fault with her. But for all that—a little wholesome discipline would be very good for her; we are all the better for an occasional buffet of fortune. When is Miss Middlemore coming, and what is to be the extent of her authority?"

"She is coming after Easter—at least, that is the time settled—if Queenie does not strenuously object."

"Of course she will object; she has been running wild too long to take kindly to any kind of restriction. The mildest discipline will seem like tyranny to her; and what are to be the limits of the young lady's power? Is she to be allowed to enforce necessary obedience?"

"*Enforce* obedience? Certainly not. It has been our endeavour to find a governess who rules by love and *moral suasion*; and we flatter ourselves we have succeeded."

"Moral suasion! moral fiddlesticks! Let Miss—what's her name?—hold undisputed sway in the schoolroom. If she go too far—which isn't likely, if she knows her duty—you have the remedy in your own hands. I only hope, for Queenie's sake, she is something of a disciplinarian."

"Of course I shall not allow Miss Middlemore's authority to be set at defiance, nor do I think there will be any danger of insubordination on the pupil's part. With proper management, there is not a more docile child in the

world than Queenie ; but she would never bear compulsion, or too much restraint."

"Nothing is easier than docility when one is never crossed ; a person must be unamiable, indeed, who rebels against the authority that enforces only what is pleasing. But, Chrissie, I think you and I had better argue no longer ; your idea of training and mine differ so completely that I am sure we should never agree, if we discussed the matter till this time to-morrow. If two women commence a dispute, you know, only dinner or a thunder-storm can stop them ; and dinner-time would bring Jonathan, and he would certainly side against me. So go your own way, my dear Chrissie—Queenie is your child, not mine ;—though I love her dearly, God knows !—the only girl in all the family ! And, moreover, her father will never permit his darling to be thwarted, even if *you* could be strong-minded enough to enforce obedience. Only remember, it is good for a woman as well as for a man, that she bear the yoke in her youth ; for depend upon it, the yoke has to be borne *some day*, and when the curb is felt, all too late, the consequences are apt to be unpleasant. Now, I will not say another word. My old father, who was a wise man in his generation, used to say, ' Our Rachel knows when to hold her tongue.' And my husband often said, nobody need preach *me* a sermon about the virtues of bridling one's tongue. And here comes our little lady."

Of course the appearance of Miss Osborne was the signal for an entire change of conversation, and Regina was pleased to listen to her aunt's conversation, which was generally amusing, and to-day proved to be rather more entertaining than usual. Though Queenie was not quite in her usual spirits ; for she had wept copiously on the bosom of her doting nurse, who, we are sorry to say, was quite inclined to sympathise with her petted little lady, and take sides with her against the threatened governess, whom in her secret heart she regarded as an interloper, and an offence against herself.

And 'Queenie was not improved by the tears she had shed, for she had one of those pure stainless complexions that are for the time most disfigured by weeping ; her

hyacinth-coloured eyes were heavy, too, the full eyelids rigid and swollen, and the delicate wild-rose of her cheek had turned to a very unbecoming flush, which gradually faded to a sickly pallor. It was only too evident that the little princess of "The Acacias" did not take at all kindly to the well-intentioned arrangement which had been made on her account. And it went to her mother's heart to see the little face overshadowed, and the languid air with which her darling addressed herself to the luncheon, which was in reality her dinner.

Chrissie would have bestowed an extra amount of petting on her, only from former experiences she had a dread of the effect of any tender words under the circumstances: the flood-gates once opened, it took some time to close them again—effectually at least, and the slightest allusion, or fancied allusion, to the source of sorrow was apt to be followed by disastrous results. For Queenie was really of a sensitive temperament, and crying made her seriously unwell, or, if she were not actually indisposed, gave her the aspect of a deplorable invalid.

She revived, however, as she daintily picked her cold chicken and ate her custard pudding; and Aunt Rachel had so many funny stories to tell, and such an account to give of the novelties of the Crystal Palace—which was in itself a novelty in those days—that Queenie quite forgot her impending afflictions, and chatted away as merrily as could be desired. She seemed quite herself again, when her mother and aunt made an engagement to go together to Sydenham and take her with them, as soon as the bitter east wind should cease to blow and Thomas the Trusty be better of his rheumatism.



CHAPTER VI.

KITTY.

MRS. FAIRFAX declined to remain to dinner, which would be served that evening a little later than usual, for Mr. Osborne's special convenience; and, indeed, the return of the master of the house was so long delayed, that Queenie, wearied out with waiting for her father, and more sleepy than usual with her headache—the result of her noon-tide flood of weeping—was quite content to go to bed and await the visit she was sure to receive in her little room presently.

"You are late, my dear," said Mrs. Osborne, as in the hall, according to custom, she relieved her husband of his bag; his slippers were toasting before the morning-room fire, and the usual can of hot water was waiting to be carried to his dressing-room. Chrissie would have esteemed it something little short of an insult had any servant presumed to be in attendance on "the master;" and even Queenie had been taught that it was a great favour to be permitted to wait upon "father."

"Yes," returned Mr. Osborne, "I was interrupted just as I was ready to start, and three minutes lost me my omnibus; unless Thomas speedily recovers, we must hire a temporary substitute—I am tired of coming home in this hap-hazard fashion. However, we shall have the rail before long, I believe, and that will be an immense convenience. I hope you sent Queenie to bed."

"Yes; she went nearly an hour ago, she was rather tired. She was going to lie awake till you came home, she said; but I went up a few minutes ago and found her sound asleep."

"All right! I will just have a look at her; I shall not disturb her."

"Where are the boys?"

James went home with John before six o'clock, and Oliver was to join them later in the evening. There is something going on at the Riverses—an impromptu dance, I believe; there was a note from Emily, I know, this morning."

Now "Emily" was Miss Rivers, and the young lady who in the early summer was to become Mrs. James Osborne.

"What a blessing it is to be at home!" exclaimed Mr. Osborne, presently, when, with his feet under his own mahogany, he was carving liberal slices from the breast of a plump guinea-fowl, while his wife served him with dainty strips of juicy ham. "It is miserably raw and cold in the City to-day. I want some of that especial claret—is there any up, do you know, Chrissie?"

"Yes, up and *aired*. You have only to open the side-board behind you. Stay, I will reach it; you are tired, and it is scarcely worth while to ring the bell and be disturbed."

For Mr. and Mrs. Osborne preferred to dine without attendance, when they were quite alone, and they generally dismissed the servants as soon as the dinner was fairly on the table, and all things duly served.

"I hope you had some hot soup in the middle of the day?"

"Yes, I had some sent in, as usual; and that reminds me that I had a basin to spare, and I gave it to Derrington, he looked so pinched and miserable. He actually came to ask my *advice*."

"What about? Is he in any sort of scrape?"

"He is always in a scrape; always wading in a sea of troubles. Just now he is afflicted by a complication of minor miseries. You know I told you there was some talk at the office about his marrying again?"

"I had forgotten, I think. But surely he will not be so foolish?"

"I am not quite sure that it is so very foolish a step; you said yourself he would be all the better for a good wife, provided he made a prudent choice. Well, he actually came to-day, craving a private audience. I thought, of course, he wanted another advance, for somehow money

does seem to slip through his fingers like water, and he has nothing to show for all his expenditure."

"His expenditure cannot be too lavish, because he has not the means at command."

"No, I do not think he is extravagant; but, between you and me, Chrissie, I am afraid he is one of those unlucky chaps who are always just a little behind the world, whether their income be large or small. He owns that, in spite of a good many windfalls, he can never exactly make both ends meet."

"And he hopes to improve his condition by marrying again? I hope he will not make bad worse."

"I hope not, for I advised him to lose no time in arranging affairs with the lady of his choice. She has a little money, it seems—a small but secure income of her own, and settled upon herself—which is a lucky thing, as Derrington would inevitably make ducks and drakes of it if he had the fingering of it. She will contribute to the household expenses, and so make things a little easier for all the family, while the husband cannot touch the principal."

"And what do the grown-up daughters say?"

"Ah, there is the rub; the two eldest are most indignant at the idea of a step-mother being set over them. Miss Kitty has been mistress ever since poor little Dolly was born, you know; and both she and the next girl—Nellie, I think her father called her—are making a fine dust about another woman being put in their dear, blessed, sainted mother's place. And the two younger girls join issues with their sisters, and help to complicate matters to the very best of their ability. There seems to be a sort of *émeute* in the Derrington household—only Dolly and the other little one, who have not the remotest recollection of their defunct parent, not attempting to interfere in the matter."

"But is the future Mrs. Derrington the right sort of woman to put over these young girls' heads, do you think, Jonathan? A little addition to the yearly income would be dearly purchased if she were an injudicious or violent-tempered person. She may be a termagant, she may be imperious, she may be extravagant, she may even be addicted to vices. Mr. Derrington is nothing to me, of

course; but he is little Dolly's father, and for her sake—poor wee mite!—I do trust he will look warily before he takes the leap.”

“He is old enough by this time to be sure of his ground. I questioned him pretty closely—which, perhaps, I had scarcely an excuse for doing, only he came and asked me for counsel. The lady is of suitable age, over forty, and a widow without encumbrance. He has known her for the last half-dozen years, and has always thought her pleasant and good-tempered, while she is esteemed by her friends as amiable, kind-hearted, religious, and a first-rate manager. If half the virtues that are imputed to this Mrs. Wilkinson be really hers, I should say Derrington will really be doing a very good thing for his family, as well as for himself. I don't know why *I* should concern myself so much about the poor fellow, but somehow it seems to be a sort of fate that he should confide his sorrows to me. There is not another clerk or porter or functionary in my establishment in whose private affairs I am interested; but ever since that fateful Christmas, when his child and ours both arrived together, we seem bound, more or less, to be mixed up with the fortunes of these Derringtons, whether we like it or not.”

“But you cannot help him through this trouble. He *must* manage his family affairs for himself. I daresay there will be more or less of a fuss—second marriages generally provoke a storm of opposition, and the first family set their faces like so many flints against the unfortunate step-mother. If I were an unmarried woman, Jonathan, it would take a great deal to tempt me to become a step-mother. Still, there can be no law, either human or Divine, which compels a man to consult his children on the question of his own marriage.”

“Of course not. But Derrington is not a strong-minded fellow; he wants bones in his character, you know. I know no man more lacking the quality of common discrimination. He is a good servant so far as he goes; he is plodding, and, in a way, industrious, and I believe he would do anything to further the interests of *Osborne and Co.*, if only he knew how to do it. But it seems to me that he is mentally feebler than when I first knew him; he is not so ‘cute as

he used to be,' as I heard one of our understrappers telling another understrapper the other day. We depend less and less upon his judgment, and I sometimes think that if I were out of the way, and James and John were sole masters, they would not be upon too much ceremony with poor Derrington. I have wished more than once of late years that I had given him his *congé* long ago."

"Is his contemplated marriage his sole difficulty? Because, if it is, I really think you need not be solicitous. He——"

"Ah, but it is not. He has been fool enough to put his name to a *bill*—'for a friend,' of course,—and the bill is overdue, and he has no more idea where he is to lay his hands on the forty pounds required to make matters square than a baby would have. That sort of man is always putting his hand to a bill for an old friend who is quite sure that it will be 'provided for' long before date, and always finding out that he has been completely taken in and done for."

"I am sure such a man wants a wife simply to take care of him. I suppose you kindly promised to get him out of the mess?"

"I did something of the kind, Chrissie, though after I had pledged my word I scolded myself for my weakness; I am a hard man naturally—I don't stand any nonsense with the fellows who owe me money; folks don't like *me* for a creditor, I can tell you. Still, somehow, I always give in to Derrington; whatever he may lack, he has the gift of making a simpleton of me. And, after all, forty pounds is not so much that I cannot afford to lose it; though it's bad policy to allow your own dependants to become your debtors. If it had not been for Dolly, and the dismal tale he told about her——"

"What dismal tale? Queenie wanted to go and see her only this morning. Is Dolly ill?"

"I am afraid she is—very poorly, at least. It seems she caught a bad cold very nearly two months ago, in that bitter weather in January, when our Queenie had to be nursed, as I daresay you remember. I am afraid poor little Dolores has *not* been nursed, or very badly nursed; for the

doctor they have at last called in says the child is wasting away without any positive malady save a neglected cold. She wants all sorts of good things she cannot have, I am afraid ; nourishing things, and a little good wine, a better air than Dorchester Street affords, and, above all, a genial atmosphere. From what I could gather, they have no fires in their bedrooms, those unlucky Derringtons."

"I dare say not," responded Chrissie, soberly ; " people in that class of life scarcely recognise the indispensability of bedroom fires, and if they do, it cannot be easy to afford them. But poor little Dolly must have her fire—such a frail little morsel as she looked when she spent her birthday with us ! What would become of our Queenie if she were put to bed every night in a cold room, and perhaps far from warmly covered ? Just think of the difference between the two children ! "

"A terrible difference, indeed. Our darling was born to luxury, and Dolores to sorrow. But, Chrissie, we cannot be accountable for other people's children ; there is Frank Stormont—he, too, has his quiverful, and his income is precisely the same as Derrington's, and *he* keeps his family in every comfort, and they lack nothing that is actually required. There must be something radically wrong in Dorchester Street."

"No doubt there is ; and can we not do something ourselves to put matters a little straight ? "

"I have been putting things straight to-day, and quite against my better judgment. To go on helping some people is to grant a premium to thriftlessness. Chrissie, if you and I had not studied economy as though it were an exact science, we should not now be where we are."

"No, I suppose not ; indeed, I am sure not. It was our maxim in those old days to be always in everything just a little beforehand, and never to incur the smallest debt. I do believe that Heaven most signally helps those who strive hardest to help themselves ; yet not always—not always. Some people do seem *born* unfortunate."

"Some people seem born *feckless*, as my old mother used to say when she put by the sixpences for my schooling in that old cracked teapot that you treasure till this day. . I

believe everybody has an opportunity if he will only seize it, instead of carelessly letting the happy chance slip by. But, with regard to Dolly, I suppose we had better look after her a little. What if we sent her a bottle of my choice Madeira, and a load of coals?"

"We cannot be quite sure that the wine will be properly administered; and, as for the load of coals, the family might not like it. One must not make paupers of respectable people."

"Certainly not. And it would be difficult to present such substantial gifts in Queenie's name, according to our regular Christmas custom. Besides, Christmas comes but once a year, and there are so many excuses for giving away at Christmas. But I don't like to think of that wan little face fading and fading, just for the lack of a few common creature comforts, that we take as a mere matter of course. What shall we do? You are good at devising expedients, Chrissie."

"And I have thought of an expedient now; but I am not at all sure that you will approve of it. Only, Queenie will like it; at least, I think she will."

"Well, let me have it."

"It seems to me that the simplest way to benefit the poor child would be to bring her here for a little while, Jonathan."

"So it would, doubtless; but I am not at all sure that it would be good for her in the long run. It would be cruel to send her back to the sordidness and poverty of Dorchester Street after we had habituated her to a life of luxury. It is not good for people to live this dual sort of existence."

"Perhaps not. But there is just a chance that Dolly may cease to exist at all, if something is not done on her behalf."

"And we *will* do something. We can take care that she has what she requires. But, Chrissie, I do not feel inclined to adopt this Child of Sorrow."

"We need not adopt her; but there is no valid reason why we should not keep her for a while as Queenie's little visitor, just till she gets stronger, and is able to rough it

again in the usual way. That house of the Derringtons—from what I hear from Nurse, and from what Rachel told me—must be a very forlorn sort of place, even for people in their position. Perhaps when the second wife comes home there will be an improvement; and the child will be better in her own home than in ours. I quite agree with you that it is unwise to accustom any one, especially a young person, to habits of luxury, which naturally cannot be perpetuated. But just as things are, I do think it would be simply kind on our part to take the dolorous little maiden to ourselves, and cosset her up for a short time. There is another reason, too, and a more selfish one, why I believe we should not be acting inexpediently.”

“Of course it would please Queenie to have a companion of her own age—for a time, certainly.”

“And not only please, but benefit her. I told her about Miss Middlemore to-day, and I am sorry to say we had quite a little scene.”

“Ah! she does not like the prospect of a governess?”

“Not at all. Maggie Courtnay has evidently given her a bad impression of the whole tribe of governesses; though I tell her we have taken care to select a very nice, pleasant young lady to teach *her*, and that when once she has found out how charming regular lessons can be, she will wonder that she was ever afraid of them. And it strikes me that she would be more easily reconciled to the idea if she had some one, just at the first, to share the restraint with her. In a fortnight I hope Dolly will be strong enough to take her place for an hour or two in the schoolroom. What do you say?”

“I was afraid Queenie would dislike the notion of having a regular governess, and I heartily wish we could dispense with the young lady. But I cannot see how the child is to have her own way, and yet be properly instructed—for I can perceive that she has her own little ways of managing *you* effectually; besides, you cannot always devote the time to her, and nothing is done if there is not regularity in education.”

“I would give a certain time to her every day, with perfect content; but I really feel that it would be far better for

her in all respects to have a proper, competent person as her appointed instructress. Also, Jonathan, our Queenie is a clever child, and wants superior teaching, which I am not qualified to give; and even what I do know must be out of date by this time—education has undergone so many improvements since I was at school. It will make all the difference to Queenie if Dolly can be with her just at the commencement.”

“I suppose it will—I have no doubt it will!” replied Mr. Osborne, slowly, after he had, as was his wont, silently and thoughtfully pondered the question. “Chrissie, I am thinking if the affair is to be concluded, it would be better for you than for me to take it in hand; I don’t feel quite inclined to invite Derrington to a second private conference to-morrow. Besides, you will see for yourself how the land lies, and comprehend exactly how far it is expedient to go in the matter, if you know precisely how the affair stands; women manage these things so much more cleverly than men. What do you say?”

“I think you are right; the task is a woman’s task just at present, I am almost certain. I will go to Dorchester Street to-morrow, if you don’t object, and make the acquaintance of the Misses Derrington, and at the same time interview the little invalid.”

“Just so. You will do the prudent thing, I am sure, Chrissie; exercise your own discretion, and all will be right.”

“Also, there is another not unimportant question. I should like to be quite assured, before a hint is given of our receiving Dolly, that the Derringtons have a thoroughly clean ‘bill of health.’”

“Of course, that is to be considered;—trust a woman, and a mother, for thinking of everything. You will not say anything to Queenie, of course?”

“Not a word. I shall take a cab from the end of the Common, and keep my own secret till I impart the result of my mission to yourself. Nurse will look after Queenie while I am away.”

And there, for that evening, the conversation ended; and next day, after an exceptionally early luncheon

Chrissie was as good as her word, and chartered a cab from the foot of Clapham Common to Dorchester Street.

Mrs. Osborne was not quite so deeply impressed as her daughter had been by the misery and dismalness of the said long, straight, dreary-looking thoroughfare. She had seen many such streets, and she and Jonathan had begun their married life in one not so very far away, and not so very vastly its superior. But then, Chrissie's experiences had been very much more varied in every way than had Queenie's; for Chrissie, as we know, came of plain, though perfectly respectable people, who thought the modest competency they had secured to her quite a little fortune. Whereas, Miss Regina was born in the purple, so far as luxury was concerned; and she was the child of prosperity and the favourite of fortune.

But Mrs. Osborne saw enough to perceive that the home of the Derringtons was by no means a comfortable one, and she had her doubts as to its being a healthful one. The rooms were indeed small—*not* "large enough to swing a cat," by any means. The sitting-room was not only shabby and untidy, but close and stuffy, as if the windows had not been opened for many a day; the carpet was dusty as well as threadbare, and the hearth forlorn and unswept. Worst of all, there arose from the basement a most unsavoury odour of unfresh fish, greens, and stale dish-water; the atmosphere was decidedly insanitary. Chrissie wondered no longer at Dolly's wan, sallow cheeks, and purple-ringed eyelids.

In a few minutes Miss Derrington appeared; she had evidently just descended from making, as she supposed, a most effective toilet. She wore a showy-looking, many-coloured *barège* of decidedly coarse texture, and many flounces, and it was extensively trimmed with common lace and cheap red and green ribbon bows. Mrs. Osborne thought how much better dressed she would have appeared in a neat grey winsey, or a plain, unpretending merino. In answer to her visitor's inquiries respecting little Dolly, she replied, "Well, yes, Mrs. Osborne, she is very poorly—very poorly indeed. I am sure I don't know what ails her, for I gave her basins and basins of gruel and syrup of squills and

sweet nitre, only she would do little more than taste it. She has no appetite—not even for almond-toffy, that she was once so fond of—and her cough wears her dreadfully. She was always a poor peeky little thing, and the trouble me and Nellie had, bringing her up by hand, is past all belief. Then she was always catching something or other.”

“Perhaps she has caught something now?” asked Mrs. Osborne, cautiously.

She must be perfectly satisfied that Dolores was not suffering from anything infectious before she made further advances.

“Oh, no!” replied Miss Derrington. “She has had measles and scarlet fever and whooping-cough, and she hasn’t any symptoms of small-pox, which, luckily, isn’t about at all in this neighbourhood. It is just a bad cold—‘a neglected cold,’ the doctor says; only I am sure she had all sorts of things from the very first. *He* says—but doctors always look on the dark side, you know—that he’s afraid the cold has settled on her lungs; it’s been a sharp winter, and I have known her run out into the back yard with nothing on her neck. Children will be children; we all learn to be more careful as we grow older.”

“She eats little, I think you say?”

“Next to nothing. She did pick a bit at a stewed pigeon a kind neighbour sent in the other day; but I don’t think she cared much about it. I’ve got her some eggs; but new-laid eggs are dear, and she doesn’t fancy any but the very freshest. I think she’d be the better of a little more fresh air, but I can’t get her to stir from the fire; she always was a poor shivery little thing. Would you like to see her, Mrs. Osborne?”

“Yes; I came to see her, and I have brought her some grapes. Is she in bed?”

“Well, no, not exactly in bed; but she lies *on* the bed most days, wrapped up in an old shawl, if she isn’t disturbed. I’ll go and fetch her down.”

“Pray do not unsettle her; I will go to her myself, if you will allow me.”

“Oh, I cannot think of your taking so much trouble,” interposed Miss Derrington, who was conscious of a some-

what unpresentable upper story ; but as Mrs. Osborne mildly insisted, protesting against the sick child being disturbed on her account, the young housekeeper yielded, and led the way up the steep, narrow stairs to the chamber where Dolly was, apologising at the same time for obvious neglect by saying, "I hope you'll excuse things being a bit out of order, Mrs. Osborne, for I've been so much upset lately that I haven't had the heart to set to work and tidy up the rooms. We've had a blow! Pa is going to marry again."

There was no time for a rejoinder, for just then the door was thrown wide open, in order to lighten the darkness of the three topmost steps, which turned the corner abruptly in a very break-neck fashion, and the lady found herself immediately confronted with the invalid, who was huddled up on a little ill-made bed exactly opposite the threshold, and wrapped, as her sister had said, in a large old woollen shawl, not unlike a blanket.

Dolly, thus roused, sat up, and looked in amazement at this unexpected invasion. She was greatly altered since her Christmas visit to "The Acacias"—very much thinner and sallow, and there was a wistful expression on the sad little face that went to the motherly heart of good, kind Chrissie Osborne. But when conversation was attempted the poor child began to cough violently, and ended by sinking back on her miserable little bolster thoroughly exhausted.

"It's opening the door," explained sister Kitty. "She always goes off in a fit like this if we let a breath of air into the room, and the chimney is well stopped up."

"Then there is no ventilation," replied Mrs. Osborne, experiencing herself a feeling of oppression. "Her head is not high enough ; she wants another pillow, and I am sure she ought to have a little fire."

"I did light a fire one day—that day it froze so hard—but the chimney smoked so we were glad to let it out again, and the child complained that she was half suffocated."

Dolly lay panting and struggling with her cough, too ill, evidently, to appreciate the beautiful cluster of hothouse grapes which Mrs. Osborne had brought with her, though she tried bravely to smile at her friend.

"Would you like to pay another visit to 'The Acacias,' Dolly?" asked Chrissie, soothingly. "Queenie would be so pleased to have you again, and we should all nurse you till you got well?"

A ray of rapture shone in Dolly's dark, heavy eyes, but she did not answer. Mrs. Osborne continued—"Well then, Dolly, if your father and sister do not object, I shall come to-morrow and fetch you in the brougham. I fancy you would soon get better in a freer and milder air."

And then, feeling that the little patient would be best alone, for there was certainly no superfluous breathing space in the chilly, stifling room, Mrs. Osborne turned to descend, and was not unthankful to find herself once more safely on the ground-floor.

"Did you mean what you said just now?" asked Kitty, rather abruptly, when both were landed again, in the stuffy little "parlour."

"Certainly I did," returned Chrissie. "With your permission I will come with the carriage to-morrow and take her home with me. A little change will do her all the good in the world, I am convinced."

"It would be the saving of her, for she wants a great deal that I *can't* give her. There's rather too much close packing in this band-box of a house to be quite agreeable; I know she wants a fire; but we can't have one upstairs, whatever's the matter."

"It does seem a very small house for so large a family," agreed Mrs. Osborne, feeling very much as if she were shut up in a roomy cupboard. "Perhaps your father's marriage may occasion some desirable changes?"

"I'd rather put up with ever so much inconvenience and do without the changes," replied Kitty, snappishly. "I never did think I should be plagued with a step-mother."

"Perhaps she may not be 'a plague,' but rather a comfort!" suggested Mrs. Osborne. "And your father certainly has a right to be considered; the responsibility, too, must rest rather heavily on your own shoulders, I should think. A second wife, if she be the right sort of a person, may prove a great blessing, and make things much pleasanter in


the home ; you may live to be very thankful that she ever came to take your dear mother's place."

"Thankful or not, I won't stay here to be snubbed and ordered about by her. I shall take a situation of some sort, or—*marry* ! I could be settled with a husband of my own soon enough, if I liked—but then, I don't care for the young man ; I cannot bring myself to *fancy* him. If pa hadn't taken this freak into his head, I'd never have given the fellow a second thought."

"Then pray do not the young man the injustice of marrying him for the sake of a home. It is a sin, especially in a girl of your age, to marry without affection, and, believe me, no good will come of it. If you are quite sure you cannot live happily with a stepmother, it will be better for both of you that you should find another home, and leave her here, sole mistress of the house. But, I entreat you, work your fingers to the bone, and content yourself with any humble dependent position, rather than take a husband whom you can neither love nor esteem."

"Ah, you don't know where the shoe pinches !" retorted Miss Derrington, in a tone that convinced Mrs. Osborne she would be no very pleasant person to deal with, if the purposed wedding came to pass ; and she could scarcely wonder at "Pa" preferring the society of an amiable wife to an unamiable and unaccommodating daughter. "It's easy to give advice where people have plenty of money, and can always follow their own inclinations," continued the girl, rudely.

"Even plenty of money brings its responsibilities, and has its obligations," said Chrissie, almost pityingly ; "rich people are not quite so free and unfettered as less prosperous ones imagine. But I must wish you good-morning now, Miss Derrington—I will be here about noon to-morrow, if you please, with the close carriage, and plenty of wraps, for your little sister."



CHAPTER VII.

IN THE NIGHT NURSERY.

MRS. OSBORNE settled everything with her husband that evening, before a word was said to Queenie, who, of course, had heard nothing of Dolly's illness. And every arrangement was made with nurse, so that next day Chrissie had only to hold herself in readiness for imparting the important news before she started for Dorchester Street.

"We have something to tell you, Queenie," said her mother, as they sat together at breakfast, Mr. Osborne having left home at an earlier hour than usual, as he had an appointment with a friend in Cannon Street; "something that it will please you very much to hear."

"Not about that disagreeable *governess*, I hope," retorted Miss Osborne, who was certainly in no very amiable mood that morning. Nurse had already lectured her for the supposed delinquency of getting out of bed "on the wrong side," and expressed a hope that her temper would be a little sweeter when she had had her breakfast.

"What I have to say to you has nothing to do with Miss Middlemore," replied Chrissie, gravely; "and it is not quite nice of you, Queenie, to speak so crossly; your governess, when she arrives, will please you, I am certain. Dolly Derrington is coming to pay you a visit."

"Oh, mother, you don't say so!" cried Queenie, brightening up in a moment. "And can we go to London to-day and buy her the new frock we are going to get for her? And will she come before the governess comes? And will she stay all day, as she did at Christmas?"

"She is coming to-day, Queenie, and she will not go home again just yet; and she will not want a new frock at present; she is very poorly—very poorly, indeed, and your father and I have agreed to have her here to nurse her for

awhile. You must be very good, my Queenie, and very patient with poor little Dolly, for she will want a great deal of care and attention for some days to come. She will not be able to play with you much, if at all, I'm afraid."

"Is she very badly, mother? What is the matter with her—has she got scarlet fever?"

"No, or I should not have dared to bring her here to be nursed; there are the servants to be thought of, as well as yourself, Queenie. Dolly has a very bad cough and cold—far worse than you had some weeks ago; and she is very weak, and altogether out of health."

"Where will she sleep?"

"In nurse's room. I have given orders for the little bed in the spare attic to be brought down and aired; if she is able for it, and if you will not tease her at all, she may, perhaps, lie on the old sofa in the nursery in the daytime."

"Of course I shall not tease her; I very seldom tease pussy."

"It will tease her if you talk to her, or ask her any questions; her cough is so troublesome that it hurts her to speak sometimes. But I know you will be quite patient, my darling, and nurse her like a little woman, will you not?"

"Oh, yes, mother, I will be very good—and so quiet; I did not make a sound, if you recollect, when you had that dreadful pain in your head, and I gave you your medicine quite regularly. You shall see how thoughtful and attentive I can be."

"Very well, dearie; and now if you have finished breakfast, go and see if your room is quite ready to receive company. You must clear the sofa of all those bricks and dolls, and of whatever else is littered upon it."

"Oh, yes; and I will put some nice flowers on the table and in the windows, and I will ask the gardener for one of the prettiest cytisuses in the greenhouse, and perhaps he can spare a hyacinth as well. Shall you fetch Dolly?"

"Yes; Thomas is so much better, that I think he can drive me to Dorchester Street to-day, and the weather, too, is much milder and softer. I shall want the large rug and

plenty of soft shawls to wrap up poor Dolly, and the foot-warmer had better be put into the carriage ; we must make the air as little keen as we can."

"I can go, too, can I not?"

"No, dear ; I think it will be much better for you to stay at home and have everything in readiness. Too much bustle will not be good for Dolores, and the less she is excited the better."

"I shouldn't excite her ; I shouldn't speak above a whisper," pouted Queenie ; but, seeing that her mother was quite firm and seemed in no wise inclined to relent in her favour, she thought better of it, and persisted no longer.

She did not even renew her importunities when the carriage drove up to the door and she saw the housemaid depositing the fur rug and certain soft fleecy wraps for the invalid's benefit. She watched her mother as she took her way across the Common, and then returned to the nursery, and occupied herself with putting out of sight the litter of playthings, and arranging the flowers that she had ordered in from the greenhouse and garden.

Meanwhile, Chrissie drove quickly to Dorchester Street, and found Dolly dressed and sitting up in the untidy, stuffy little parlour, by a roaring fire that had raised the temperature of the small room to something a trifle cooler than a baking-oven. The heat and the want of air quite appalled Chrissie, and she dreaded for herself, as well as for the invalid, the transition from such an atmosphere to one which seemed almost frigid in comparison. Dolly lay back in her uncomfortable, cushionless armchair, gasping for breath ; in the bright morning light her surroundings appeared more dusty and dingy than ever. There was fire enough for a room ten times the size of that suffocating parlour, Chrissie thought ; decidedly Miss Derrington was anything but a young woman of faculty. Her sister Nellie also put in an appearance, and stared at Mrs. Osborne as though she were some kind of strange animal ; she had very little to say for herself, but she reprimanded Dolly for coughing so convulsively and making "such a dreadful noise." Jennie and Maggie did not show themselves ;

Annie came and kissed her little sister most lovingly, as Kitty volunteered to lift her into the carriage; she seemed quite too weak to cross the narrow pavement.

The child looked even worse than when Mrs. Osborne had seen her on the previous day, and so worn and listless that it was evident she could scarcely speak, and that only in a hoarse, breathless sort of whisper. Mrs. Osborne made haste to shut the carriage door and drive away. As she hastily waved her adieux to the gazing family, she wondered if she would ever visit Dorchester Street again, and also whether little Dolores would ever return to her sordid, miserable home.

It took a very short time to drive back to "The Acacias," and Queenie was at the door, looking out for the carriage. Her face, however, lost its eager, expectant look, and sobered visibly as she saw Dolly lifted into the house. Queenie had never in all her brief life seen anything so pallid or so listless as the shadowy form, muffled up in rugs and shawls, that Thomas, in spite of his rheumatism, took tenderly from Mrs. Osborne, and carried to the dining-room. Queenie was so impressed that she found it impossible to ask the sundry and manifold questions that were trembling on her lips. How *must* it feel to be borne about in people's arms, just like a baby!—to look so lifeless and exhausted, and to be unable to talk!

In a few minutes, however, Dolly was conveyed to the comfortable upper chamber which nurse called her own, where there was a good fire burning, and everything that could possibly minister to the requirements of a sick person. Mrs. Osborne herself superintended the undressing and putting to bed of the little patient, while Queenie waited below, in silent and perplexed amazement.

The doctor, who had been sent for, paid his visit in the course of the afternoon, and, after carefully examining the child, very much relieved Mrs. Osborne's mind by deciding that the little girl was suffering more from the results of neglect and bad nursing than from any actual malady. She had had a very bad cold, and the cough was really most exhausting, but the lungs were only slightly and temporarily affected, and *with care*—the doctor emphasized his words—

there was no reason why a week or two should not see her on the high road to convalescence.

"And there is not any chance of infection?" asked Chrissie, anxiously; "would it be quite safe to allow Queenie to be with her?"

"As far as infection goes," replied Mr. Grahame, "it would be perfectly safe; of course you would not allow the children to sleep together—invalids, for countless reasons, are much better by themselves, and a healthy child ought not to be permitted to breathe the same air with an unhealthy one for any length of time. Neither can the sick little one bear to be disturbed in her present state; things will alter in a few days—she will doubtless be able to enjoy the society of her friend—and then a little pleasant intercourse will be beneficial."

"What would have been the result had I not brought her here?" asked Mrs. Osborne.

"Had she continued in a fireless bedroom and in bad air, without proper nourishment, I have little doubt that she would have grown weaker and weaker, till disease actually set in, and when once real mischief is at work there is no saying where it may end. I will look in again in a day or two, Mrs. Osborne; in my opinion the little one needs good, careful nursing rather than downright doctoring. Keep her where she is, and in an equal temperature, at present; give her some wholesome kitchen-physic, and I think we shall find the cough yielding to the remedies employed, and the fever gradually abating. I know your nursing capabilities so well that I need not multiply directions or prescriptions. When she begins to revive, and *asks* for Queenie, companionship will do her good. Till there is a change she is certainly best alone."

The doctor was quite right; Dolly's state was not nearly so serious as might have been supposed, though, had she been left much longer to the care of her inexperienced nurses, whose ideas were altogether of the old-fashioned, exploded school, there is no saying how soon fatal symptoms might not have been developed. The pure, sweet air of the Common—for in those days Clapham was quite a sylvan retreat—and the small but bright fire that burned steadily

n the grate, and was kept up day and night, soon worked wonders in Dolly's condition. On the third day she seemed to enjoy her beef-tea ; on the fourth she asked to be read to while she nursed Queenie's pet kitten ; on the fifth she only coughed at intervals, and inquired for Queenie herself.

Thereupon Queenie, being charged to exercise due discretion, was allowed to spend an hour in the old night-nursery. In the meantime no one appeared to inquire after Dolly's progress, though, of course, Mr. Osborne was supposed to carry a daily report to Lawrence Pountney Lane, which would be duly communicated to Mr. Der-
rington.

At the end of a week the little girl was so far recovered as to be able to be dressed and enjoy the society of "Florinda," who, like her mistress, seemed to have suffered from the rather careless *ménage* of Dorchester Street. The radiant complexion with which she had left "The Acacias" was terribly dimmed, and her elegant costume was very much the worse for wear. "But I should like my old doll," said Dolly one day, with a pathetic little sigh. "I do wish I could have Annabella with me in this nice, comfortable room."

Mrs. Fairfax was keeping watch in the sick-chamber ; she had become very much interested in the patient child who bore her illness with so much sweetness, and submitted to every needful restraint without a word of fretfulness. She moved her chair to the side of the sofa, where Dolly lay luxuriously among the cushions, and asked, "What is Annabella like ? and why do you want her ? Is not one doll enough ?"

"Oh, yes !" replied Dolly, heaving another little sigh. "Annabella is not at all pretty. I am afraid Queenie would think her quite ugly ; she is very old ; I don't believe she was quite new when the lady at the Green Dragon gave her to me, and I have had her a long time—years and years ! But I do love her ; she goes to sleep so comfortably cuddled up in my arms, and it would spoil Florinda to have her snugly in bed."

"We'll see what we can do," replied Mrs. Fairfax.

"It is quite right of you to care for your old favourite. Perhaps if I sent round to Dorchester Street, your sister would send you Miss Annabella."

"I am sure Kitty would say she was too dirty and shabby," responded Dolly. "She wanted me to let her be burnt when I took Florinda home; but I could not bear that, you know."

"Of course not. Who ever heard of such a dreadful thing? The little girl who discards her old dolls, may be somewhat fickle in her friendship when she begins to grow into a woman. Leave me to look after Annabella for you."

"Oh, thank you, ma'am, so very, very much!" said Dolly, the tears starting to her eyes, "if it would not be too much trouble. I ought not to have forgotten her when I came here first, but I was so ill that day I felt as if I could not think, and Kitty packed Florinda along with my clothes; besides——"

"Besides what, my dear?"

"Why, Kitty was a good deal put out that morning, and I don't think she would have liked to be troubled. We're going to have a new mamma, you know, and it makes Kitty very mad; she says step-mothers are a wicked invention, and ought to be done away with by Act of Parliament."

"That would scarcely be in accordance with our ideas of British liberty, I am afraid, and a step-mother may be a very great blessing, as well as a great calamity. Don't set yourself against the good lady your father means to bring home, presently, Dolly. Perhaps she will make your home more comfortable and happy than it has ever been."

"I am afraid nobody can make it that; but, ma'am, I thought step-mothers were always cruel and unkind? Kitty read ever such a long story in a book she had from the library, about a very bad woman, who married the children's father and then poisoned them all—boys *and* girls—because they came in the way of her own sons, and kept them out of the property. And it really was a most interesting tale, though generally I don't like to hear about murders."

"It was only a tale, and I dare say a very untrue one ; don't concern yourself about it. And, little Dolly, begin to pray for your step-mother at once, and ask God to bless her, and make her a comfort to your father and to all in the house. I am afraid the new Mrs. Derrington will not have a very pleasant berth if your sisters feel so unkindly towards her already."

"That she will not," replied Dolly, emphatically, in her quaint, old-fashioned way, that made people forget sometimes that she was only a little girl. "Kitty and Nellie talk very often of the ill-natured tricks they will play her, and Maggie and Jennie intend to *pay her out*, I know ; though I am not quite sure what paying anybody out really means, but it is something she will not like, I am sure."

"No ; she will not like it, for it means spite and malice, and all kinds of naughtiness in those who take the 'paying out' into their own hands. It generally means taking a base little underhanded revenge on some one who has been unfortunate enough to offend ; and you know, Dolly, God is very much displeased with people who foster anger and malice in their hearts. 'Vengeance is Mine,' saith the Lord ; 'I will repay.' That is written, you know, in the Bible, and it means what it says. God is angry when people set themselves to disobey Him, and it is a sad thing to make the Lord God angry, Dolly."

"Yes, ma'am," and Dolly shuddered a little : "God can punish a naughty, disobedient child, for ever and ever !"

"My dear, some people, and good people, too, talk about God as if He were such an one as themselves, and took care to '*serve out*' the children who sinned against Him. Now this is a terrible mistake. God punishes us when we offend against His holy law, not to make us miserable, but to show us how wrong we have been, and to make us better. God punishes us because He loves us. I have big boys of my own that were once little boys, and I have whipped them and sent them to bed before now ; not that I was wroth with *them*, but that I loved them so much that I knew they must take the consequences of the faults they committed, or else grow worse and worse, and make more and

more mistakes, and so suffer in the end far beyond what they could suffer at my hands. My boys don't plague me now, because they love me too much to vex me. And, little Dolly, that is the way to obey your Heavenly Father—who is Father and Mother all in one—to do what He bids, because *He* bids it: to do His will, because it is *His*; to fear to offend Him, not because of the punishment that may result; but because He is the best and dearest Friend, and we love Him more than anybody in the world. It is not so difficult to obey people whom we really and truly love."

"And can one love God—*like that*?"

"Certainly we can, little one, and a great deal better. And the best way to love God is to know Jesus Christ, who came into the world to show us what love and goodness really are. And the love of Jesus Christ is the love of God; the two are *one*. But now we have talked enough, and I have finished my long piece of sewing. Don't you want some more black-currant jelly?"

"No thank you, ma'am. I have plenty for to-day—and—and do you think it would be wrong to thank God, as well as Mrs. Osborne, for all the nice things I have?"

"Certainly not. It would be only right, for the good God, your kind and loving Father, gave all these things to Mrs. Osborne before she could give them to you, and *He* put it into her heart and into Mr. Osborne's heart to bring you here, that you might be properly nursed and taken care of."

"It was very good of God, and very kind of Mr. and Mrs. Osborne. It is so pleasant to lie here, and see the sun shine, and the water sparkle, and the boys at play on the Common. And the trees will soon begin to be green again, nurse says. Then everything inside is so beautifully clean and nice, and the room is warm without being stifling. I can breathe quite comfortably; and I've felt as if I had a string twisted round my neck ever since that snowy time in January, till two or three days ago. And the medicine doesn't make me sick; and it's so comfortable to have a bath every evening, close to the fire. Only I am afraid I shall not be able to help being very sorry when the time comes for me to go home, and I have been here a whole

week already ! The days do slip away. Do you know, ma'am, how long Mrs. Osborne means me to stay ?”

“No, my dear, I do not ; but I am sure you are to stay on at “The Acacias” for some time longer yet ; that is, if your father does not object. And I do not think he will ; for he must know that this air is doing you good, and will do you still more good, when you are able to go out. You will have to be quite well and hearty, I fancy, before Mrs. Osborne and Queenie will listen to a word about your going away.”

“Oh, I am so glad ! I can't help being glad !” And the child leaned back on her pillows and heaved a deep sigh of full content.

Before another week came to an end, Dolly was so much better that she was allowed to spend the day in Queenie's nursery, and even to go down into the dining-room after luncheon ; and at last—one lovely April day, a sweet, bright Sunday, on which all the green earth seemed keeping holiday—Nurse told her that she was to be dressed for the two o'clock dinner, and go down with Queenie, to dine with the family : Mr. Osborne himself had desired it.

Dolly thought a little ruefully of her old, faded frock, when the hour arrived for her toilet ; it was the sole dress she had brought with her, and was not only shabby and far from clean, but also very much worn, and quite too short, for she had shot up wonderfully during her illness, though she was still so thin and wasted as to excite a good deal of compassion among the servants. She was quite an inch and a-half taller than Queenie, who was rather inclined to envy her superior stature. Just as Nurse had finished brushing and smoothing Dolly's straight black locks, which were entirely free from curl, Mrs. Osborne came into the room, followed by Queenie, in a pretty new dress of some soft woollen material, warm enough for the season, but not too heavy for the spring days that were close at hand. And she carried with her another little dress, exactly similar to the one she wore.

“This is for you !” cried Queenie, her lovely face all glowing with delight ; “you are to put this on, and wear it every day—mother says so. Throw away that nasty old

threadbare thing, all dirty and faded, and ready to drop to pieces ; it is not fit for you any longer."

"Is it for *me* ?" asked Dolly, quite subdued at the sight of her finery. "Am *I* to wear this beautiful frock ?"

"Yes, my dear, if you please," said Chrissie, taking the garment from her outspoken little daughter. "You see, this dress is quite too thin for you, and it is really very much tumbled, through your lying on the bed in it so long at home. We have rigged you up in one of Queenie's little dressing-gowns since you have been able to be up and dressed, and we have taken your old frock downstairs into the work-room, where we have had a young person sewing all the week ; and by dint of copying that, except in length, we flatter ourselves we have succeeded in getting a really good fit. Let me try it on, my dear."

The frock was quite a success, and fitted as well as could be expected on such a thin, pinched, angular little figure. It was of good plain material, and very simply made ; for Chrissie thought it would be scarcely a kindness to give the poor child a fashionable costume, such as Queenie had pleaded for, which would be a contrast to all her other frocks, both present and to come. Queenie had grumbled a little at the want of ornamentation, and had almost clamoured for a further supply of lace and fringe ; but Chrissie had been firm, very much to Aunt Rachel's surprise. It would do Dolly no good, but harm, she contended, to dress her as, probably, she might never be dressed again ; and as Queenie had elected that the dresses should be exactly alike, she must conform to the prescribed pattern ; it was a good, nice, suitable frock, such as any little lady might be content to wear, and that was surely enough !

Dolly was far more than content ; she was in a state of rapture, and contemplated herself with intense satisfaction as she viewed her own reflection in Mrs. Osborne's long panel-glass. And Queenie shared her delight, and made up her mind that it suited her friend exactly ; but when she said something about the old dress being thrown away, or given to the gardener's little girl, Dolly replied gravely, "Oh, no ; I daresay I shall be able to wear it again in

Dorchester Street very often ; it will not be out of place there, and Kitty said she could easily make it longer in the skirt when she had an hour to spare ; for there's a lot of the stuff—Maggie and Jennie both had frocks of it, only they outgrew it, and part of it was made up for Annie."

"And then it was made up for you ?" observed Queenie, disapprovingly. "I shouldn't like to have a lot of sisters older than myself, if that was the way they treated me, giving me their old shabby clothes to wear out. It is a very great shame ; and I would not stand it, if I were you, Dolly."

At which Nurse laughed heartily ; but Chrissie said, "Don't give Dolly bad advice, Queenie. If Philip had been a girl, I am not at all sure that I might not have had one of his outgrown garments altered for you. When your brothers were little boys your father was not nearly as well off as he is now ; and I have often made James's coat to fit John, and John's to fit Oliver, and so on ; and the boys never grumbled."

"I dare say not," replied Miss Osborne, with her most superior air ; "but boys are boys, and girls are girls ; and girls like to be dressed nicely. I know I do ; I should never be content to take to old dresses, one after another. I am very glad I have no sisters, so it can't be ; and, mother, Maggie Courtnay says that nothing would ever induce her to wear a hat or a frock for two seasons ; she always has everything quite fresh, and in the newest fashion."

"I am afraid Maggie Courtnay is not a very wise little girl, and I do not care about her being so much with you. It is Sunday, and we will not talk about our dress any more ; Dolly looks so very much better that I hope she will be able to go to church with us by another Sunday morning ; she will like that."

"Oh, yes," responded Dolly, her spirits rising as she felt the cheerful glow of returning health and experienced the novel satisfaction of being "beautifully dressed."

"Our church is a very nice one, and the congregation is a nice one," added Queenie, patronisingly ; "and I am sure you will like the singing and the organ. But our minister always wears a black silk gown, and not a white night-shirt sort of thing, as you say your parson does at Brixton."

Dolly cared very little about the "parson's" dress, whether it were black or white; but she longed to go out on to the sweet, breezy Common, that she might see the buds on the trees, and walk on the daisied grass, and go close to the rippling water, that seemed to dance and quiver in the happy April sunshine. And then she went down with Mrs. Osborne and Queenie, and was treated very kindly by Mr. Osborne and by Mr. John Osborne. And with the exception of that ever-memorable Christmas feast, this was by far the grandest dinner to which Dolly Derrington had ever sat down. And the dessert that followed made her eyes glisten and her mouth water, in spite of the good helping of chicken and asparagus and lemon-pudding that had been previously consumed.

CHAPTER VIII.

FAMILY AFFAIRS.

EASTER came and went, and the two children enjoyed themselves quite wonderfully. Dolly, though not very strong, was declared convalescent by the doctor, while, according to her own account, she was just as well as ever she could be, and a great deal happier and better than she had been since she could recollect. But she went in fear of the mandate which should be issued—and which must come sooner or later—regarding her speedy return to Dorchester Street. Almost a month had elapsed since her leaving home.

And one fine morning, when Dolly was least anticipating it, Miss Derrington and Miss Nellie Derrington, made their appearance at "The Acacias," ostensibly to inquire after Dolly's health, but really, as that young person astutely guessed, to ascertain when she might be expected to rejoin

the domestic circle. Kitty and Nelly were very gaily dressed—it was the age of crinolines, and they wore enormous hoops; also, they sported what they innocently imagined to be extremely fashionable bonnets. During the walk from Brixton they had privately assured each other that their head-gear was “simply *stunning*.”

“Well, Mrs. Osborne,” commenced Miss Derrington, “I suppose you are pretty well tired of Dolly by this time? When are you going to let us have her at home again?”

There was just a slight accent of sarcasm in Miss Derrington’s tone that did not please Chrissie, and as she glanced at Dolly she observed the shadow that gathered on the sallow little face, and the droop of the quivering underlip. “Are you really anxious for her return?” she inquired.

“Well—*no*!” candidly answered Kitty; “I can’t say we miss her so very much, for we’re overfull as it is; and really nursing is not very much in my way, though somehow I’ve managed to get my share of it; and I am pretty well tired of it, and of a good many other things too, Mrs. Osborne, I can assure you.”

“Indeed?” was all the reply Chrissie could give. Miss Derrington’s half-sneer and half-defiance rather puzzled her. Nellie sat still, looking a little sulky—*glumping*, Queenie called it—and evidently not knowing what to do with her hands or her feet. She had learned to dance—after a fashion—but she had clearly never learned how to sit still gracefully.

“Of course, I am tired, and any one would be tired,” continued Miss Derrington; “bringing up a family, and keeping up a home that isn’t your own, is thankless work enough. But, thank Heaven, I’ve done with it; my new stepmother must try her hand at it now, and I only hope she’ll like it, that’s all!”

“Is your father married, then?”

“Not yet; but he will be in less than a week. And I’m off, and so is Nellie.”

“Then I’m sure I had better keep Dolly if her father does not actually want her.”

“*Want her*? He never did want her; he often says he wishes she had never been born if she couldn’t have been a

lad. She's been a lot of trouble, and I suppose she always will be—a poor, puny, spiritless little scrap of a baby. I never did know a child so often wanting the doctor, and catching everything almost she could catch, to say nothing of coughs and colds without end.”

“I fancy you do not understand children,” said Chrissie, in a tone of reproof; “a little tender care prevents a great many of the ills that flesh—especially juvenile flesh—is heir to. Dolly's cough is very much better, and the air of the Common is doing her good. I think, if Mr. Derrington does not very much object, we will keep her a little longer.”

“Oh, pa won't object; not he! And just now he can't think of anything but his *bride* that is to be; there's no fool like an old fool. I've had about enough of it, and so has Nellie, and we shan't stop to see the wedding—we shan't be wanted.”

“No, indeed,” responded Nellie, in an angry voice; “girls of our age had rather not stop and see their own father making a fool of himself.”

“But are you sure that he is acting so very foolishly? May he not be able to judge what is best for his family as well as for himself? And second marriages are not inevitable blunders.”

“It must be a blunder when you've grown-up daughters who've borne the burden and toil of everything for years, and the bother of making both ends meet, when they *won't* meet, on any terms! to go and put a strange woman, that they hate like poison over their heads.”

“But are you justified in hating your father's affianced wife ‘like poison’? What has she done to make you dislike her so very much?”

“She's coming to be mistress of the house and of *us*, and her ways are not our ways; she's mean and stingy, and so dreadful fussy that I know her own niece couldn't live with her. She allowed the girl no peace nor liberty, and she wouldn't even let her dress as she pleased; and she has queer, strait-laced notions about everything. Now, me and Nellie, both of us, detests strait-laced folks, that has a will of their own—and a very unpleasant will, too—while all the time they speak as if butter wouldn't melt in their

mouths. I can't away with hypocrites, Mrs. Osborne, and this Mrs. Wilkinson is a hypocrite, double-dyed, if there ever was one."

"You are perfectly certain of that?"

"I haven't a doubt of it. Why, she sets up for being as good as good; she dresses like a Methodist; she don't hold with girls having a bit of fun; she sings hymns, and she goes to church—no, to *chapel*—on week nights."

"I go to church—perhaps you'd call it *chapel*—on Thursday evenings; I am very fond of singing hymns—indeed, we all are; but I hope we are not hypocrites."

"Oh, no; I dare say not. You are in circumstances to please yourself. If it is any pleasure to sing hymns and to go to prayer-meetings and the like, why should not you? You are well off, and can afford to do as you choose. Every one to his own taste—we can't all be tarred with the same brush, like brute beasts in cattle pens—we must have different diversions."

"I think I will ask Mr. Osborne to speak to your father," was Chrissie's rejoinder. She was getting heartily tired of the conversation. "If Mr. Derrington will agree to it, I think I should like Dolly to stay on with Queenie, and share her studies—at least till the household in Dorchester Street is reconstituted and settled. The wedding will be next week, I think you say?"

"Next Tuesday, I suppose; but my own comes first."

"You have decided, then, on marriage?"

"That I have! I don't like the notion of being kept under by anybody—I'm not made for dependence and servitude; I never was. Fred is very fond of me, and he won't take 'No' for an answer, and he has got a rise in his wages. There is a little bit of dressmaking to be had cheap, out Camberwell way, and I have worried father out of a few pounds, and Nellie will go partners in the business and live with me and Fred. Fred vows I shall have everything my own way. Who knows how we may get on all of us—Fred with a rising salary, and we girls with a spirit and an ambition that may end in seeing us at the head of a West-end establishment?"

"Do you understand dressmaking?"

"Well, I can't say I have been apprenticed to the trade, but I have a very good notion of following the fashions. And Nellie's handy with her needle, and we've a taste for millinery too. We both hate slaving at housework, and Fred promises me that we shall keep *a girl*. So I'm marrying to better myself, you see."

"I hope you are, and I wish you all success in honest business. Your younger sisters remain in the old house, I suppose?"

"Yes, Maggie and Jennie are not high-spirited girls like me and Nellie; they have not much *go* in them. I hope they'll hold their own, and not be cowed by a tyrant of a stepmother. I've given them the best advice I can—to take their proper place as soon as she comes, and let her take hers, and not meddle with them. Then Annie is a child, and must expect to knock under to new rules. She's rather fond of books and grave talk. I shouldn't wonder but she'll take kindly to singing hymns and going to chapel every night of the week. As for Dolly, she must make the best she can of it, but it will be a queer change for her when she goes home out of a house like this." And Miss Derrington cast a half-admiring, half-scornful gaze around the handsomely-furnished room in which she sat.

Mrs. Osborne did not like to speak too positively about Dolly's immediate future till she had conferred with her husband; but her heart yearned over the child, and she longed to shelter her from the probable evils that seemed to overshadow her. But Queenie had no such misgivings, and few scruples in any direction. She took an immense dislike to Dolly's sisters on the spot, and straightway addressed herself to warfare.

"Dolly is *not* going back—please to understand that," said Miss Osborne, in the tone of a young princess who has no idea of encountering opposition—"a governess is coming to teach us next week, and I can't and *won't* do my lessons alone. I am quite sure father will not allow her to go back to that stupid Dorchester Street while I want her. So, that is quite settled."

Miss Derrington bridled, and Miss Nellie sniffed a little,

but neither of the young ladies seemed to be provided with a suitable rejoinder ; indeed, the elder sister observed afterwards that little Miss Osborne's air of superiority fairly took away her breath.

Then, as it was about luncheon time, Chrissie felt that she could do no less than invite Dolly's sisters to partake of the mid-day repast ; and they immediately consented, nothing loth, glad of the opportunity thus afforded of making a satisfactory dinner, and at the same time gratifying a little not unnatural curiosity. The dainty meal was duly appreciated ; but the bottle of sound burgundy which Mrs. Osborne ordered up for the special benefit of her impromptu guests met with no commendation. "Such poor, weak, sour stuff !" exclaimed Kitty, when she and Nellie were free to express their criticisms ; "I'd rather have a glass of good 'home-brewed,' or half a pint of bitter ale, any day. I did hope she would have given us some *champagne*, for we've neither of us ever tasted it, and, of course, it's the tip-top thing, and what's regularly drunk among the swells." They were a little surprised, however, when, being left alone with Dolly for about a quarter of an hour, they ascertained from her that champagne was not the order of the day ; that Mr. Osborne preferred claret and Chablis to stronger wines, and that Mrs. Osborne generally took water, and Queenie always.

"And what do they give *you* ?" asked Nellie, with her large eyes wide open.

"Oh, I've had all sorts of things—lots of milk for one thing, and plenty of filtered water. Mrs. Osborne does not approve of little girls being accustomed to 'stimulants,' though I have had some wine called *Madeira*, and some very old port that was dreadfully nasty, only the doctor ordered it—half a wine-glass twice a day ; and Nurse says it cost a heap of money, and is not easy to get now for love or money."

"I should say everything can be got for money," responded Kitty, feeling really interested ; "as for love, I don't know. Give me plenty of hard cash, and I'll have wine at a guinea a bottle if I want it. Go on, Dolly ; tell us all about it, and how you live here generally."

"They have been very kind to me," said Dolly, with a fluttering voice—"so kind that I could never make you understand it all. I have had a fire in my bedroom, and such nice things to eat, and medicine that did me heaps of good, and black-currant tea, and jelly, and lozenges, and I don't know what else besides; and not any gruel, *or* any sweet spirits of nitre, for I said I did not like either of them. And now I am taking *cod-liver oil*."

"That's filthy enough, I know. It's expensive, but horribly nasty."

"Not so nasty when you're used to it. It's best taken in nice new milk, and it is to make me quite strong and well, and Mrs. Osborne wishes me to have it. Why, I'd drink ink, or vinegar—almost poison—if she wished it; I'd do anything in the world for her sake, she is so good."

"I think you are in luck's way, Miss Dolly; it's the best thing that ever happened to you being born on the same day as that precious piece of impudence, Miss Queenie, as she is called. It's fine to be the favourite of fortune."

"Do you mean that Queenie is the favourite of fortune, or that I am?"

"Why, 'Queenie,' of course. You're the child of sorrow, and sorrow is the legacy your mother said she left you when she lay a-dying. Only just now you're in luck, prime luck! and I advise you to mind your p's and q's, and think twice before you go to offend that magnificent young princess with the big blue eyes and the golden hair. Keep in with her; stick to her through thick and thin, and you'll have a chance of going shares in heaps of her good things, for she's queen here, and no mistake, I can see with half an eye. And, by the bye, where did that grand frock come from?"

"Queenie gave it me—her mother said she might. I was nearly ashamed of that old plaid I brought from home, and it was up to my knees."

"Well, it's beautiful material, there's no denying it—the finest and softest cashmere I've had the handling of for a long time; just feel it, Nellie; and the tucker's real lace, or I'm much mistaken. Shouldn't I like it on my wed-

ding bonnet. But it is not at all fashionably made; lots of little flounces, or else double skirts, are all the go just now. It's real good stuff, but it's a sin and a shame to make such unpretending use of it. Why there's no style about it."

"Never mind; it's very pretty, and Mrs. Osborne said it was becoming; besides, it's as comfortable as a frock can be, and I *know* the lace is no imitation; I heard Queenie's mother say so."

"It's lovely! I only wish I had it. Oh, you little wretch, it's much too good for you; I've half a mind to tear it off you, as you stand, and run away with it. It would look a world better on my bonnet than on that stupid little frock."

And Kitty stretched out her greedy hand, as if she meant there and then to carry out her threat, while Dolly drew back, till she almost fell into the fender, crying out, "Oh, don't, please! I wish I could give it you, but I can't. What would Mrs. Osborne say?"

"Nonsense, child; I don't mean it. What a little original you are! Not but what I'd take it, if I dared; but I daren't, and that's flat."

An assurance which went a great way towards quieting Dolly's perturbed spirit. Then she asked, "Are you really going to be married, Kitty?"

"Yes, child, the day after to-morrow—so I've got the start of Pa, you see; and Nellie is to be my bridesmaid, of course. Would you like to go back with me, and see our dresses? Mine's a stunner, I can tell you; one isn't married every day; will you come?"

"I think not, thank you. Where are you to be married?"

"At Brixton Church, of course; where else should I go? Ah! you're in with the chapel people now, so you'd better humour their prejudices; they can be of use to you, no doubt. But it isn't the thing to go to chapel; Fred and I mean to put in for High Church, which is almost as good as being a Roman Catholic, he says, only you don't go right over, and you don't lose—lose—what is it, Nellie?"

"Lose *caste*."

"And that's a thing you can't understand, little Dolly. But you remember Fred Chapman?"

"Of course I do. He used to call me a little monkey, and a *scrub*."

"He's so full of his fun. Don't you like him?"

"No; I don't."

"Why not, miss?"

"I think he tells *fib*s, and he smells of smoke and beer; and I have heard *you* say he is tipsy sometimes."

"Indeed! and what else, Miss Dolores?"

"He says very rude things; no servant in this house dared say such things."

"Upon my word! I wish I had you in Dorchester Street, you good-for-nothing little puss! I'd teach you to slander your betters. I've a good mind to——"

But what Miss Derrington had "a mind to" was happily left undeclared; for just at that moment, before Dolly had time to tremble for the result of her indiscretion, Mrs. Osborne, and with her Queenie, returned to the drawing-room, and Kitty made haste to recover her equanimity. A few minutes afterwards the young ladies took their departure, with profuse assurances of the pleasure they had derived from Mrs. Osborne's entertainment, and many injunctions to Dolly to "behave herself," and make the best use of her unprecedented opportunities.

When they were gone Dolly breathed freely again. Queenie would have criticised their late visitors, but her mother gently checked her, and she contented herself with asking her friend if the rest of her sisters were of the same pattern as the two who had just quitted them. And Dolly timidly replied in the negative. She had certainly no wish to discuss Kitty and Nellie just then, for her recent experiences had taught her to estimate the worth and the superiority of good breeding, and she could not but feel a little ashamed of her elder sisters, although Mrs. Osborne and Queenie had not been privileged to hear their most candid confessions.

She only said she wished they knew Annie, and she did hope the new stepmother might not be unkind to *her*. It was a good thing that Annie liked reading, and was so very

quiet, and fond of learning, and even of singing hymns. Dolly evidently thought a good deal of Annie, who was not much more than two years older than herself, and her favourite companion. She had earnestly wished Annie could see the beautiful doll's house and the splendidly attired dolls in Queenie's nursery, ever since she had been well enough to enjoy the society of "Florinda" and the circle in which she had once moved.

Dolly was an intensely realistic little girl, as may be gathered from the fact of her devotion to poor old battered "Annabella," whom she had been accustomed to take to bed with her every night, and to dress and undress, and shelter from the cold, as sedulously as if she were a sentient living creature. And she had confided to Annie, who admired the new doll-inmate of the house hugely, that though it was delightful to have "Florinda" for a child, and keep in order her various grand *toilettes*, she could never care quite as much for her as for her faithful "Annabella." Also, she felt a certain pity for "Florinda," torn from her brilliant and accomplished friends, and from all the luxurious surroundings of "The Acacias," and doomed to live in a miserable, shabby house in Dorchester Street, where the costermongers plied their trade without dread of the police, and dirty, noisy children ran up and down the pavement, and took their recreation on the doorsteps. And as Dolly became well enough to enjoy life at "The Acacias" herself, it was no small ingredient in her cup of happiness to know that "Florinda" was restored once more to her accustomed sphere. That cup would have been overflowing but for the apprehension of the return to the old sordid life, with which she felt she could never be quite content any more. She and "Florinda" would be in evil case whenever the day—the inevitable day—should arrive, and they should return together to the unlovely haunts of former experiences.

But Dolly yearned for Annie, and sometimes pleased herself with trying to imagine what would be her youngest sister's astonishment and delight if she could but for a single day enjoy the happiness of breathing the ambient air and beholding the glories of "The Acacias."

"And why do you wish us to know Annie?" said Queenie, after an interval of silence.

"Because she is the nicest sister I have; and, oh, wouldn't she be delighted to have a governess! She does so want to learn things—all sorts of things; and if pa—I mean father—could only afford to send her to school, she would be ready to dance with joy. But Annie told me, when I first knew about Mrs. Wilkinson, that she was 'educated,' and that she believed she could and would teach her a good many things. And, for all that Kitty and Nellie say, I have a hope that she and the new stepmother *may* get on together; for people do say Mrs. Wilkinson is nice, and I know that Annie is really very nice—*very* nice, indeed, Mrs. Osborne."

Mr. Osborne, being referred to, at once decreed that Dolly, for the present, must certainly remain at "The Acacias." Anticipating the companionship of a fellow-pupil and fellow-dunce, Queenie was getting almost reconciled to the prospect of her schoolroom life, and was even anxious to behold the countenance of her new governess, and accord her something of a welcome. And when, on the following Monday morning, Miss Middlemore arrived, a little before ten o'clock, Queenie was full of expectation, and quite prepared to be as gracious as possible. As the day wore on she became delighted; for Miss Middlemore contrived to interest her in every fresh proposal. New books were to be purchased; a list of requisite stationery made out; a large *atlas* was brought in from the library; the old piano, so little used in the drawing-room, was relegated to the morning-room, henceforth to be known as the "*School-room*"; and a brand-new Grand Trichord, a superlative *Collard and Collard*, of full compass, and with all the latest improvements, was expected to arrive on the morrow from the manufacturers' warehouse.

"Oh! it's just charming!" said Queenie, when, luncheon being well over, they rushed incontinently to the "schoolroom" to prepare their lessons for the morrow. "Dolly, I mean to be so clever. I mean to learn music and French, and German and Latin—all the languages—and, as Mrs. Courtney says, 'all the ologies,'

whatever they may be! I mean to learn *everything*—don't you?"

Dolly replied, very soberly, "I think I shall like to learn all I can while I have the opportunity. It would be nice if I *could* manage to learn so much as to be able to help Annie. She is always making out things by herself, you know, and getting into ever such a muddle. And then, if we could get to be *governesses*, somehow, and, perhaps, in time, keep a school together, wouldn't it be splendid!"

"I don't know; I fancy I should not much like to keep a school. Maggie Courtnay says schoolmistresses are not 'in society'; and father and mother both wish me to be 'in society' some day, I know. I am to 'come out,' you see, when I am old enough to go to dinner-parties, and balls, beautifully dressed, and to wear my sapphires. Of course, you cannot 'come out,' not as I shall have to do, for nurse has told me all about it, and so have Philip and Herbert; I don't suppose people in Dorchester Street ever do '*come out*,' do they?"

"I should think not; I am afraid I do not understand; but they do have tea-parties—beautiful tea-parties, sometimes—in our neighbourhood; with shrimps and *creases*, and muffins, and plum-cake, and all sorts of things! And there are 'tea-gardens,' in some places, where you pay so much a head, and enjoy yourself tremendously. Kitty and Nellie have often been, and so have Maggie and Jennie; but Annie and I have never been asked, because we are so little. And there are *Balls*, too; there was one at the *Green Dragon* this winter, and Kitty and Nellie went—only pap-pa—I mean father—did not quite like it; and he grumbled dreadfully over the money they were obliged to spend in getting light dresses and artificial roses to wear on their heads. There was a very grand Ball, given in honour of something, or somebody, at the Assembly Rooms, no further off than Kennington; and Kitty and Nellie cried themselves quite sick because they could not go. Father would not hear of it, and they had no dresses fit to wear at such a place. Those they had for the dance at the *Green Dragon* were not fine enough, and they'd got them torn, too, for some of the young men, Nellie said, were

rough, and trampled on them—at least, upon their flounces ; and then they said they hadn't a single ornament in the world, except two old necklaces that wouldn't ever keep snapped ; and no one could go to a ball of such consequence and grandeur without, at least, a *little* jewellery. There was a friend who would have lent them her 'garnet set,' only she was going out to a dance herself. But, you see, there *is* society about Dorchester Street."

"Yes ; but I do not think that is the sort of society in which I am likely to *come out*. The servants have their tea-parties, I know, and, I think, a lot of water-cresses—and shrimps, and prawns, and sweet cake ; but then, such entertainments are for servants and shopkeepers—not for ladies."

"I shall never be a lady," said Dolly, with a profound sigh. "It must be very nice to be rich, and wear beautiful things. I must do the best I can, and make the best I can of what I can get. But, Queenie, I sometimes wish—only *sometimes*—that I had never known any better. There are grand houses at Brixton, and at Streatham Hill, where I have been—houses as beautiful and pleasant as "The Acacias," but I never thought of what they might be like inside ; they were far above me and all of us—and I don't think I knew that Dorchester Street was so *very* horrid and vulgar till I came here and found out the difference. And there *is* a difference, you know—a very great difference."

"Of course there is ; I wouldn't live in Dorchester Street, and go to dances at a public-house, for all the world. And, as you are at "The Acacias" now, I would not think about Dorchester Street at all—nor talk about it, if I were you, Dolly. Let's be as jolly as we can—though mother says 'jolly' isn't a nice word ; let's enjoy ourselves, and never mind the people who go to 'tea-gardens' ; let us think of something nicer."

"Well, we *will* !" replied Dolly, with an obvious effort, and another suppressed sigh ; "only, you see, Queenie, dear, this is your home, and it isn't mine, and whatever Dorchester Street may be like, and whether I think about it or not, I shall have to go back to it—in time. It is *my*

home, and I don't see but what it will have to be, perhaps for years and years. I was born there."

"And I was born here, Dolly; but I dare say it will not be my home always; and I am not sure that I want it to be. But—I don't mean you to go back yet awhile. I am going to tell father this very night that I can't do without you, and that he is to settle about your stopping on—we won't say how long—with your father—your *pap-pa*, as you will call him."

"I won't say pap-pa again; I know you don't like it."

"No, indeed. Nurse tells me that only babies and common people say *pap-pa* and *mam-ma*. And *Pa* and *Ma* are worse still! But I've just thought—your father is going to be married to-morrow, so he won't be at the office, and my father cannot speak to him."

"He will soon be back again; *father* isn't one to take long holidays. I've heard him say he cannot afford them. But all this time we have been talking, and talking, and never looked at our lessons. Which shall we learn first?"

"The geography, I think. I do like to find places on the map. Open the atlas, it's on the table, and put Dorchester Street and the *Green Dragon* quite out of your head."

And the little girls addressed themselves to their books, and then Dolly proceeded to study her *notes*; for it had been settled that Queenie was to give her her first lessons in music.

And next day arrived a good-sized, clumsy package from Brixton—a quantity of Dolly's clothes, which she might be supposed to stand in need of, as her visit was to be prolonged—and, to her great delight, she found, wrapped up in an old cotton frock, which had been declared too short for her two summers before, her beloved, but sadly disfigured, Annabella. She might, indeed, have been described as a doll "couped in all her parts." One leg was broken off at the first wooden joint, and the foot of the other was missing altogether. The arms had been mended, and the face *smashed in*. Queenie decided that "Annabella" had had small-pox violently, and had suffered from several carriage accidents, as well as from some painful internal disease;

while Nurse gave it as her opinion that the luckless doll was in what she described as a "deep decline." Dolly, however, was pleased beyond measure. Once more she could sleep with her shabby old darling in her motherly arms.

There came, also, the news of Kitty's marriage, and her new name printed upon a very thin and shiny bit of card-board—"Mrs. Frederick Chapman." "Mr. and Mrs. Derrington" also sent cards, and what the children thought much more to the point—viz., a good-sized wedge of orthodox wedding-cake, which Mrs. Osborne, however, advised them to distribute chiefly among the inhabitants of the dolls' house, as she had very strong doubts as to its wholesomeness. It was decidedly *heavy*, she felt convinced, and the icing was by no means of first-rate quality; and, lest the girls should be disappointed, she bought them a plain seed-cake, with which they could make a feast and invite all the dolls, Annabella included, to an evening party, the famous miniature tea-service being proudly used on the occasion.

When, at the end of the week, Mr. Derrington made his appearance in Laurence Pountney Lane, in the character of a bridegroom, he was, as Mr. John remarked, "finely chaffed;" but Mr. Osborne himself simply wished the newly-married man all joy and happiness, and gave him to understand that he had no intention of parting with Dolores—at present. "*Queenie could not do without her.*"

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CHAPTER IX.

A MOTHER'S PERPLEXITIES.

AND for a long time—for nearly twelve months, indeed—Queenie could not "do without" the friend of her soul Dolores Derrington, and for the space of three months Queenie worked at her lessons with such unremitting

energy and diligence that her mother began to tremble for her health. The lovely summertime was at hand, and both children rose early in order to devote themselves to their studies. Queenie began to pore over her books before it was fairly light, and sometimes lectured Dolly profoundly for her laziness in sleeping when the sun was shining. Dolly, though wonderfully improved in every particular, was still weak, and, at times, languid; and she was not so easily roused to enthusiasm as the high-spirited and versatile Miss Queenie.

Chrissie anxiously watched the new order of things, but she scarcely liked to interfere. Still, when it came to Queenie poring over her French grammar and conning her verbs at five o'clock in the morning, she felt that it was really incumbent on her to check this undue devotion to intellectual pursuits. She spoke first to her husband; but his apprehensions were not easily awakened. "Take no notice," he said, complacently, when his wife begged for his intervention; if it please the child to enact the juvenile blue-stocking, let her have her way; I dare say her whim will not last long. You will be wanting to scold her for idleness next, I expect. If she is actually poorly, or at all out of sorts, you must at once proclaim a holiday—and we were talking of the seaside the other day, you know; and, of course, there must be an end of lessons while we are at Ilfracombe, or wherever we may decide to go. Don't trouble yourself, my dear; let Queenie have her fling—her little caprice will not endure."

"You do not fear that Miss Middlemore is over-urging Queenie, then?"

"I think Miss Middlemore is too wise and too prudent a person to attempt anything of the kind. And the other day, when I told Queenie that I thought she had too many lessons, she informed me that she always learned twice as much as she need, and had quite determined to become a wonderfully clever woman. She seemed rather to despise Dolly for being so inert and dull; and laughed at her because she had not yet mastered simple addition, or conquered that dreadful verb *avoir*."

"Nevertheless, I wish I could be quite sure that undue

pressure is not being put upon her ; she is such a child, and her brain ought not to be overworked. I have thought of speaking to Miss Middlemore ; but——”

“ If I were you I would let things go on a little longer, and I think I would not interfere with her schoolroom *régime*—at least, not yet. If Queenie begins to look at all fagged we can put an end to the term whenever we please, and be off to the seaside.”

“ I should like to go somewhere next week. I am quite convinced the child is doing too much ; she is writing exercises, too—*French* exercises ! No child of her age ought to be poring over *Hamel*. I remember crying over those genders when I was almost thirteen, and as for the verbs, I believe *avoir* and *être* were drummed into me, and, perhaps, two or three more ; but I stuck fast at *aller*, and have never to this day taken another step. Before I had fairly got *aller* into my weary head I was sixteen, and everybody left school at sixteen in those simple days, when poor girls were not expected to develop into literary ladies, or to qualify for what is called the ‘higher education.’ ”

“ My dear Chrissie, education in our days was quite a different thing from what it is at present ; neither you nor I had extraordinary advantages, you know—indeed, I had next to none, and at fourteen I had to begin the world on my own account. But I learned a lot of things after my school days were quite over, and I soon found out that knowledge was power, and I plodded on under all sorts of difficulties. I was fond of books, and I contrived to pick up enough French to serve my turn, though I never could make myself well understood in France ; and as soon as I could afford it I took some lessons in Latin, and I tried my hand at German, but never made much of it. I dare say our Queenie has a taste for information ; she takes after her daddy. Why, Chrissie, I recollect how you took alarm when James and John first went to their boarding-school, because they had classes before breakfast.”

“ Did I ? Well, I suppose I thought principally of their constitutions. I never did hold with such very early work ; it stands to sense that it is not wise to cram the mind before the body is allowed a single meal. Let children begin the

day with good wholesome food—and plenty of it—then let them go to their lessons betimes, and work well while they are at them. There is the old proverb, ‘All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy ;’ and I am tolerably sure that too much mental work, and very little play, makes but a poor, miserable weakling of a girl. Rachel is coming to stay with us next week, and I mean to talk over the subject with her.”

“Do so ; Rachel was always the authority of the family ; if *she* thinks Queenie is being overworked, I shall fancy she is, and be quite ready to take immediate action. Meanwhile, don’t worry yourself ; Queenie is sure to cry out the moment she is hurt.”

And so, when Mrs. Fairfax came to “The Acacias,” she was left for two or three days to form an unbiassed opinion ; and then Chrissie proceeded to hold the projected consultation, as she was more than ever convinced of the unwisdom of Miss Middlemore’s plans.

“Miss Middlemore’s plans ! What are they ?” asked Aunt Rachel. “She does not seem to me to have any fixed plans. I fancy Queenie holds her own in the schoolroom—she does pretty much as she likes ; just now it pleases her to learn the maximum of lessons, by-and-by she will learn the minimum. I should not be surprised if she fling her books aside in less than six months ; let her stick to them while she will. Queenie is a most changeable young lady, full of whims and caprices.”

“Indeed, you don’t do Queenie justice, Rachel. I tell you she is working away till I tremble for the result. Why, this morning she was at her books before the clock struck five, and I overheard her telling Miss Middlemore, the moment she came, that she had learned—I forget how much ; but about six times as much as the task that had really been assigned her.”

“And did she know her task ?”

“That I cannot tell ; I abstain on principle from visiting the schoolroom in lesson-hours. I have no doubt she did. Queenie is a child of unquestionable talent ; she has ten times the ability of little Dolly Derrington.”

“Oh ! little Dolly ! how does she get on with Miss Middlemore ?”

"Very well, I believe ; she is rather slow, I fancy, and she has certainly never been taken much pains with. She reads but badly ; she takes about an hour to write a copy, and she has not yet mastered simple addition or learned the multiplication table. No fear of Dolly overworking her brain ; but she will make a good needlewoman, and I insist on her doing a little sewing—and doing it neatly—every day."

"Has she quite recovered her health ?"

"Quite ; though, perhaps, she is not so strong as she ought to be ; she has never been a very healthy subject, I should say. Still, good air and wholesome food and regular hours have done wonders for her. Do you not think she is *looking* wonderfully well ?"

"I do indeed. She does you credit, Chrissie ; and she is an extremely well-behaved child. Her complexion is dark—I may say *swarthy*—but she is no longer sallow and sickly-looking, and she knows how to walk without turning in her toes. If she were not so deplorably thin she would make quite a pretty little figure. Is she going with Queenie to the seaside ?"

"I suppose so ; Queenie quite expects to have her friend with her ; and, indeed, it will be good for Dolly ; she has never seen the sea, and the change will really do her good, and set her up for another winter."

"No doubt she will be benefited, in more ways than one ; but Chrissie, what are you going to do with that child ?"

"I don't know that I am going *to do* anything with her, Rachel. We have not pledged ourselves to take any precise course with her. We brought her here till her health should be restored ; then came her father's marriage, and a general upsetting of the household in Dorchester Street. And then Queenie would not be satisfied unless Dolly was her companion in the schoolroom ; and so it has gone on."

"But how long will it go on ?"

"That is more than I can tell you. Till Queenie is willing that she should return to her own family, I suppose. There has been nothing said about her going home as yet, though of course the day will come when her long visit must be at an end."

"How long has she been at 'The Acacias?'"

"Almost three months. She has been extremely happy, I am sure."

"Too happy, I am afraid. Chrissie, it is certainly no place of mine to interfere with your concerns—not though Jonathan is my own brother; but I cannot help saying that I think you have your duties as regards Dolly Derrington, as well as your duty towards your own daughter. It seems to me—forgive me if I exceed my prerogative—that you may do that child far more harm than good if you keep her with you much longer; unless, indeed, you are intending to make some suitable provision for her future. Her life here must needs be in direct antagonism to her life in Dorchester Street. Is it well to accustom her to luxuries and refinements that must necessarily be withdrawn when she leaves this house?"

"Indeed, Rachel, the same uncertainty has perplexed me not a little already. Jonathan has given no hint of any idea of adopting her; nor has he spoken of taking further charge of her education. The child is a good child and a nice child; but I am always asking myself whether I am not doing her a positive unkindness by accustoming her to amenities which are inconsistent with her proper sphere in life."

"Exactly; it may be worse than unkindness—it may be injustice. I tell you honestly, Chrissie, though I appreciate to the full the comforts and elegancies of my brother's home, I should hesitate to spend any length of time as your visitor. I am not rich; I am only a woman of moderate means, and I don't care to take rank as a poor relation. If I stopped on here all your circle would be asking *who* I was."

"And that would be a question most easily and satisfactorily answered—you are my husband's own sister."

"And people would think, and say, too, that your husband's sister had far better keep to her own station. We women, whatever our standing may be, take rank from our husbands and not from our brothers. You are Jonathan's wife, and you have a right to all his possessions; I have a right to his fraternal kindness and to his help, if I

need it—nothing more. Nothing can ever make me a gentlewoman ; my husband was an honest, respectable man—that is all.”

“ Rachel, I think you are a very proud woman.”

“ Perhaps I am. A woman who has taken the position you have cannot very well comprehend the exact disadvantages of her poorer relations. I make the best of myself, of course ; that is my lawful right. I won't undervalue myself, and I won't be undervalued. I should despise myself, as well as render myself despicable, if I pretended to be a lady because Jonathan is undoubtedly a gentleman. Now, if I lived constantly with you, I should be like Mahomet's coffin—between two worlds. And that is just what poor little Dolly will be if you don't keep her permanently, or if you delay sending her home much longer.”

“ I am almost sure that Jonathan will not consent to her return just yet—not while Queenie makes such a point of retaining her.”

“ I shall speak to Jonathan myself. I always was famous for speaking my mind, you know ; and though I am not exactly my brother's equal—because he has risen in life and I have not—I feel it my duty still to speak to him as plainly as my conscience dictates. I do not see—I cannot see—why he, or you either, should sacrifice what is not your own to your idol Queenie. As Christian people, as professing members of a Christian Church, you have no business to do anything of the kind.”

“ Rachel, what *do* you mean ? How are we sacrificing Dolly to Queenie ?—for that is what you would infer, I suppose ?”

“ Don't be offended. You have not sacrificed her yet, though the sacrifice is impending. If Queenie had not taken such a violent fancy to Dolly, you would never have removed her out of her own sphere ; you might have befriended her, but it would have been quite in another way. She would not have been exposed to the risks which must beset her, even now ; she might have suffered some hard discipline, but she would have remained content with her own folk and her own home surroundings. She will not easily settle down in Dorchester Street now. Why, if

I, who have learned to know what life is, and to reason as becomes a sensible woman, were to spend six weeks at 'The Acacias,' I should miss a thousand luxuries when I went back to Marlborough Terrace; and yet my little home is a palace compared with the Derringtons' sordid *ménage*. I haven't got to sweep floors, or clean grates, or wash up dishes, as they *must* do unless they utterly discard comfort and common decency; and yet I should feel dreadfully the lack of what I had been so long accustomed to. My one maid-of-all-work could not fail to contrast most unfavourably with your accomplished parlourmaid, and your two smart housemaids, and your excellent cook, and your confidential old nurse, to say nothing of your coachman and gardener, and all your other respectable retainers. I should not be as perfectly contented as I once was, I am pretty sure. I dare say I should begin aping your ways, and setting myself up for 'Mr. Osborne's sister,' and pining for no end of things—for superfluities that had come to be mere commonplaces, just from habitude."

"Rachel, when you have quite done running yourself down and undervaluing your proper position, I should like to know exactly what you are driving at. I want, in plain words, the *moral* of your fable, the application of your most eloquent sermon."

"Nonsense, Chrissie; you know as well as I do the point to which I am tending. I am afraid I am assuming somewhat of an obnoxious character. I am playing the *rôle* of the interfering sister-in-law with a vengeance; and sisters-in-law can be a terrible nuisance, I know. I know I all but hated poor Mary Jane Fairfax before she married Thomas Robinson and went to live in Canada, she was that exasperating. I never could bring myself to be honestly attached to my husband's relations, the more shame for me to say so. Well, now, *I* am going to be a nuisance, for I feel it borne in upon my mind to speak to you faithfully, and that, of course, means *unpleasantly*. My moral is little Dolly Derrington; the application of my sermon lies almost in a nutshell. Is she to be Miss Derrington, of Clapham Common, or is she to be poor Dolores, of Brixton?"

"I feel a little annoyed at your pertinacity, I must

confess, Rachel ; still, I believe you are in the right. Things cannot go on as they are. I have really seen that from the beginning ; but I have tried to shake off the sense of responsibility that would not be repressed. In the meantime, Dolly is a very dear little thing, and never presumes. Nurse has taken quite a fancy to her ; and Miss Middlemore, though she cannot say much for her brilliance, thinks her a most satisfactory pupil. I really do not see what is to be done at present. Dolly is looking forward to Barmouth, for we have all but decided upon going there this season ; and then—there is the wedding.”

“James’s wedding, of course ; though that will not be celebrated here, but at Chestnut Grove. Dolly will not be obliged to appear at that.”

“I scarcely see how it is to be avoided, though I can perceive that it is not at all expedient ; but you know it has been settled all along that Queenie shall appear as one of Emily Rivers’s bridesmaids. She was to pair with Emily’s little cousin, Fanny, and the dresses were arranged, when, about three weeks ago, poor Fanny and several of her brothers and sisters all sickened with measles, so that intercourse was naturally suspended between Reading and Hampstead. Emily was quite disappointed, till James suddenly bethought himself of Dolores ; and they came here together last week and saw Dolly, and put the idea into Queenie’s little head, and so it became somehow *une chose arrangée*.”

“And Jonathan does not object ? ”

“On the contrary ; he seemed quite pleased that Queenie should not be disappointed, for Emily had some notion of dispensing with the child’s services, and substituting two of her former schoolfellows for her and Fanny Gordon. And, after all, it will be a great treat to Dolly, and just one day’s dissipation will not, I hope, harm her.”

“It ought not, certainly. Still, it will give her a further idea of the life in which she has neither part nor lot. Her next wedding experience will be, no doubt, when one of her own vulgar sisters figures as a bride. There will be plenty of cake, such as Kitty—I beg her pardon—Mrs. Frederick Chapman distributed in honour of the happy occasion.

And there will be a composite repast, and plenty to drink, and coarse compliments and coarser jokes, and, perhaps, an unceremonious little dance—dignified by the title of a 'ball'—held at the most convenient public-house, and unfortunate Dolly will, in spite of herself, be drawing unsatisfactory contrasts, and she will be vainly wishing she were somebody else, with different surroundings and an altogether different destiny. The wider are her present experiences the worse it will ultimately be for her."

"Rachel, I think you take the very worst view of the business that you can. Can't you catch a glimpse of silver lining in the cloud that overhangs the poor child's career?"

"Her career may be all very well, if her friends, through mistaken kindness, do not mar it. I was talking to Dolly the other day, and I very soon discovered that her highest aspiration is to be a governess, and, perhaps, in process of time, to unite with her sister Annie in keeping an unpretending day-school. Now, if I were a rich woman—which you know I am not, Chrissie—and if I had not three big boys, for whom it is my duty to make every possible effort, I would do something for these hapless Derrington children. I think I would put them to a good school as half-boarders, or something of that kind, and get them situations as junior teachers or governess-pupils as soon as they were properly qualified; and then they would have a respectable living in their own hands. And if they persevered—and God gave them the blessing of health—the world would be before them. And they would, as my Tom says, 'be beholden to nobody, and owe nothing to anybody, beyond the debt of gratitude.'"

"A debt that is very rarely paid, I fancy."

"Rarely, I dare say; but one must leave all that, and do the right thing."

"And you would advise me to send poor little Dolly home without further ceremony?"

"To send her home, or else keep her for better or for worse. And if all I hear be correct, matters are a good deal mended at Dorchester Street; the new Mrs. Derrington is a good and sensible person, and as Dolly is to be her

charge, the sooner the step-mother and the step-daughter make each other's acquaintance the better."

"Dolly did spend a day at home, and she will pay a similar visit before we go to Barmouth. I should be sorry to set up any sort of barrier between the child and her own family."

"And what did Dolly think of the aspect of things at home?"

"Well, I did not inquire. I thought it wisest to be silent. But I gathered something from Queenie, and more from Nurse, who is not quite as discreet as I could wish. Dolly came back, looking very grave and thoughtful. Her report was that Mrs. Derrington had got the house into nice order, and was very kind to Annie, who had taken to her immensely. Maggie and Jennie were in no wise reconciled to the change; they are evidently under the influence of their elder sisters, and I am afraid will cause the new wife a great deal of vexation. But Dolly said it was all so much more comfortable, and her father looked 'quite spruce'! Mrs. Derrington had made great alterations; she had brought a good deal of furniture with her—among other things, an old piano, and she was teaching Annie music. But still, as she confided to Nurse, there were many ugly, lumbering things about, and the ornaments were not pretty, and the house itself seemed miserably small, and the ceilings low, and the rooms so cramped you could hardly turn round in them. The neighbourhood, too, seemed to vex poor Dolly's soul, and really I don't wonder at it. I would sooner live in the meanest cottage on Salisbury Plain than inhabit a mansion—if there could be such a thing—in Dorchester Street. It does seem a shame to send the child back to such unlovely surroundings."

"Then why send her back at all?"

"Rachel, there are two, if not more than two, standpoints from which the question is to be viewed. If we take Dolly we take her for life, or, at least, till she comes to womanhood. And if we so take her, ought we to separate her from her own family? I could not—I think I ought not to allow myself and my own child to be mixed up with those uncomfortable Derringtons. It is not only that they are

poor, and will always be poor ; it is that they belong entirely to another grade of society. We cannot in any way make equals of them, nor can we lift them out of the abject poverty that I am afraid will be their continuous portion. It would be impossible to associate with girls like Nellie and Kitty. Queenie was confounded at their loud voices and loud laughter, though I must say their accent was not so bad as it might have been. But they murdered the Queen's English without remorse. I would not keep a servant in my kitchen who told me that she *wouldn't have went* to a certain place, or informed me when she returned from the greengrocer's that they were 'selling *of* it,' whatever it might be, at tenpence a pound."

"And did Mrs. Chapman and Miss Derrington really so commit themselves ?"

"They did, indeed ; I could see that poor little Dolly was ashamed, and I could only hope that no one else would call while they were here. Of course, no one is actually the worse, nor to be despised, for such lapses ; but it is—well—*not nice !*"

"That it is not. I have always insisted on my boys talking pure English ; they are not liberally 'educated,' of course, any more than I am, but I thought it my duty to undertake that they should read correctly, write a good plain business-hand, understand figures, and speak their own language properly. They went in afterwards for French and Latin, but that was not my affair ; they *could* do without foreign languages, I dare say, though, of course, they have more chances with them. Well, Chrissie, it is really serious if these young women are so—so objectionable. Perhaps their step-mother may be able to reform them ?"

"They would not be reformed, I am convinced, and I doubt if they are not perfectly satisfied with their own superior style ; and, strange to say, Jonathan declares that their father speaks fair English, and very rarely offends. When I was saying something about my own poor education the other day, Jonathan remarked that it is not so much 'book-learning' which conduces to civilisation as plain good sense, and a little breadth of mind, coupled with due perception.

I learned grammar as a girl, but I forget all about it—and I am not sure that I really know a single rule—yet I can speak correctly ; it's all habit, and the wish to do what is right instead of what is wrong. When people have the opportunity of hearing good English, and don't profit by it, it seems to me that they are either extremely stupid, or wanting in true moral perception ; and these girls have had their opportunities, and flung them to the winds ; they have had their choice, and they deliberately chose the evil—not the moral evil exactly, but depravity of taste.”

“And that is next to depravity of mind. Really, Chrissie, you are somewhat in a dilemma, and it is difficult to advise you, for I am not the wisest woman in the world, I am afraid. My inclinations would say, ‘Take the poor child and make the best of her, but separate her from her own people.’ My conscience would reply, ‘But is that the good and righteous course? What does God put us in families for, if the bonds of blood are to go for nothing?’ Where there is immorality—*actual* immorality—I don't think we need much concern ourselves about consanguinity ; we may separate ourselves, and do no wrong ; but, as far as I can learn, these Derringtons are not bad or unprincipled people.”

“They are what the world would call quite respectable, and I should not hesitate, if they were dishonest, or inebriate, or disturbers of the public peace ; I would in some way, if it were possible, separate Dolly from her kindred. But we have talked a long while, you and I, Rachel, and we have discussed the subject in every possible phase, and we are no nearer a decision than when we began. Now, it seems to me that, after all, we—that is, you and I—had better not try to come to a definite understanding any longer. The duties that perplex us are certainly conflicting ; perhaps it will be as well to wait for Divine guidance. I do think it was God's will that I should interfere, and save the poor little thing from lingering misery, perhaps from death. God ordered that movement, most certainly ; I did not do it rashly, or entirely on my own responsibility. Perhaps the good Lord will direct us as to whether we shall keep her or send her back to her own people.”

"You are right, Chrissie. A little longer or a little shorter time cannot matter; and, as you say, a little patient waiting may solve the vexed problem, and show you what you *ought* to do. I am afraid I am too fond of laying down the law."

"And as I owe obedience to Jonathan, as well as thoughtful consideration for Queenie, I think I shall leave my husband to decide what really is the best."



CHAPTER X.

THE JUVENILE BRIDESMAIDS.

IT so happened that the day before Mrs. Fairfax returned to her own home at Camberwell, she had the opportunity of holding a little confidential conversation with Miss Middlemore, whom she had already discovered to be a very superior young woman—not by any means a polyglot governess, but admirably adapted to her present situation.

Miss Middlemore had had some years' experience; she was a little over thirty, and though not what people call "accomplished," was well fitted to impart the rudiments of a sound English education to her pupils, and fully competent to teach them the first elements of French and music. More than this she did not pretend to; but she was patient and sweet-tempered and cheerful, and knew how to keep insubordinate young people in check, and to hold her own, both in school-hours and out, with a certain mild dignity that very much impressed Mrs. Osborne. Also, she was a good judge of character, she had quick perceptions, and sound views of life; at the end of the first week she had formed a pretty just estimation of both children's capacities and dispositions. She arrived at "The Acacias" at ten o'clock every morning, and remained till half-past

two—taking luncheon, or early dinner, rather, with the family.

She had stayed rather later than usual that afternoon, and was just preparing to leave the schoolroom when Mrs. Fairfax entered it. Both the children were at play in the large garden, and Mrs. Osborne was occupied with a visitor. It was not Mrs. Fairfax's way to beat about the bush when she wanted to converse on any particular subject ; so she straightway began to inquire of Miss Middlemore whether she thought Queenie was, in her sudden zeal for learning, seriously over-working herself.

"She is doing rather more than I could wish, just now," replied the governess ; "she has a young friend—a Miss Courtnay, if I do not mistake—who has quite made up her mind to be a *bas bleu*, and Miss Osborne has resolved to follow suit without delay ; but I think, Mrs. Fairfax, I need scarcely tell you that the *furor* will speedily be over. Queenie is very much a child of impulse ; what she wishes to do, she will do, and that without any consideration. She has no idea of yielding either will or wishes ; she must go her own way, in her own fashion, and she has not a notion of self-control or of discipline."

"Is not that because she is such a spoilt darling ? She has never been thwarted, you know."

"I soon found out how very much she was indulged, not only by her parents, but by her brothers, and by every member of the family. And yet she is a most lovable little creature, of a singularly generous disposition ; if she have not too much good fortune, if her fancies be not too constantly humoured—if, in short, she have the happiness to encounter a few mild misfortunes, and to be disappointed now and then, she will make a noble woman, I am convinced. She has in her the elements of a splendid character. If she were but one of half a dozen girls like little Dolly !"

"Ah ! and what is your opinion of Dolly ? She is rather dull, is she not ?"

"She is slow and plodding, not dull. She has had but few advantages, nor has she a physique to stand mental labour, as Queenie has ; but I am much mistaken if the

race between them—if, indeed, there be any race—be not that of the tortoise and the hare.”

“Queenie being the hare, of course?”

“And Dolly the tortoise; and you know that ‘slow and steady wins the race.’ Queenie may go on at her present pace, till the holidays commence; but I think not. Already I begin to detect symptoms of flagging, and I should be greatly surprised if I did not. She wants to conquer all before her; she is looking for a royal road to learning.”

“But she certainly has more than ordinary capacity, and she is quick?”

“Very quick; so quick, that I am doubtful of her ability to retain one half, or one quarter, of what she acquires. Now, Dolly, though rather slow, and not too bright, is painstaking, and she has a retentive memory. It takes her some time to master what she has on hand, but, having mastered it, it becomes her own, and she is not very likely to forget it.”

“What are her studies?”

“They are not, as you may suppose, at all numerous. She read very badly, and had slipshod notions of spelling, when I first began with her; she is slowly but steadily improving from day to day. She is just beginning to join letters together in text and round-hand, and she is very fond of finding places on the map. She had not seen an atlas till I introduced her to one, and her appreciation of it was extreme; she is learning the multiplication table, and she does short sums; but I am afraid she has little genius for arithmetic. Still, I feel that she has done very well since we commenced in April—quite as much, and rather more, than I could have ventured to expect, judging from her antecedents. She is a conscientious, industrious little thing, and she takes life quite *au sérieux*—I suppose because her experiences have not been of the brightest.”

“*Au sérieux*! That is to say, seriously—is it not? I am no French scholar, but I have picked up a few phrases in books. Queenie is learning French, I know; has Dolly commenced the language?”

“As a study, decidedly *no*. I teach her a few words every day, and she knows a few common phrases and

sentences—that is all. I only expected to keep her as a pupil for two or three weeks, so I did not commence with anything like a grammatical course. But I think she will remember what she has learned, and some day, doubtless, she will turn it to account.”

“And Queenie has undertaken her musical education, I believe?”

“Queenie did undertake it; but she tired of the duty, and quickly abandoned it. By Mrs. Osborne’s request, I give Dolly her music-lesson every day; she knows all her notes, and practises little five-finger exercises. She wants very much to attempt a simple tune, and I think I shall indulge her very shortly. The mite actually wants to be of use to her elder sister; if they only could be trained for *governesses*, she says—if they could only keep a little school together, and be independent of their father! Oh, we often have a little confidential talk together, Mrs. Fairfax, and I know something of her home. It is a thousand pities that the child’s education should be neglected; she would well repay any pains that might be taken. Queenie says she is going with her to Barmouth, or to Tenby, it is scarcely settled which at present; and I am glad of it, for the sea-air will be so good for her. But I suppose she will go back to her own home when Mr. and Mrs. Osborne return to Clapham?”

“Indeed, I do not know. I really believe that it will depend very much upon Miss Regina herself. At present, she insists upon Dolly being her companion at the seaside; it remains to be seen how long the predilection will endure. It is quite upon the cards that next quarter Queenie may prefer to study by herself.”

“Or prefer not to study at all! This sudden passion for lessons is quite too ardent to last; I fully expect to have some trouble with her when we resume our little studies in September. I should not be surprised if she refused to learn anything, or only took up her books on compulsion.”

“I told Mrs. Osborne I thought she need not distress herself on Queenie’s account; she was afraid that her health would give way if she devoted herself so energetically to her studies. I was quite sure that Queenie would never inor-

dinately distress herself. Bless me ! the child's whims have ceaseless variations ; she is as changeable as the winds."

"But it is a pity that Dolly should suffer from her caprices—or 'variations' we will say. Still, if the poor little Derrington is to go back to her own family, the sooner the better ; it is scarcely quite safe—it is not desirable—to make a plaything of an inferior in position."

"Human playthings, large or little, involve most serious responsibilities. But on that head, Miss Middlemore, I can say very little ; nor does it become me to expound myself at all freely while I am my brother's guest. He will settle the question of Dolly's future, I expect ; Mrs. Osborne will leave it entirely to him."

"And he will leave it *almost* entirely to Queenie. I beg your pardon, Mrs. Fairfax, but I do wish that Queenie could be under a little more decided discipline. She will go on having her own sweet way, and gratifying every wish, till she is quite convinced that the world was made exclusively for her pleasure and her convenience ! and she will continue dreaming blissfully and contentedly enough till some day she *awakes* ! And most terrible will be the awaking !"

"That is what I have said to my brother and my sister more times than I can remember. Perhaps they will be a little impressed, if you say precisely the same thing."

"*I?* I have no right to give my opinion. I am hired to teach these children all I can, not to dictate to their elders on their own errors of judgment. Still, I will venture something to save so fine a creature as our little Queenie from being permanently spoiled. There the children are, crossing the lawn ; they will wonder to find me still in the schoolroom."

Mrs. Fairfax departed for Marlborough Terrace the next day, and early in July came the wedding at Hampstead. The delicate pink and white suited Queenie admirably, but the same tints did not at all accord with Dolly's dark complexion. It was in vain that nurse tried to dress her effectively, and it was extremely difficult to do anything with her lank black hair, which obstinately refused to curl on any terms, though the poor child was subjected to various strange processes for several days previous to the auspicious

occasion. In vain they tried "curling fluid," and as for ordinary curl-papers, Dolly went to bed every night with bristling head, and a sense of being extremely uncomfortable. At last, in despair, a skilful hairdresser was sent for, early on the wedding morning, and Dolly's rebellious locks were reduced to something like respectable order.

But the performance was by no means a success, for long before the little bridesmaids reached "The Chestnuts," Dolly's carefully-arranged ringlets were almost straight; and they hung around her thin, sallow little face like a disordered veil when the bridal party was ready to set out for church. Dolly, as a bridesmaid, was not herself a success. She paired but badly with the radiant, smiling Queenie, who looked her loveliest standing demurely behind the younger Miss Rivers, and contemplating her exquisite bouquet of delicate blush-pink rosebuds and stephanotis, which she brought with her from Clapham, and was proudly furnished by their own gardener. He had made up one exactly similar, or so he supposed, for Dolly, but somehow it was as unsuccessful as the rest of the child's appearance. The flowers showed limp and languid, the maidenhair ferns withered long before the ceremony was over, and the little girl herself was overpowered with shyness, and would fain have shrunk away from the rather critical glances of so many unfamiliar faces.

She was awed, almost frightened, at her unaccustomed surroundings, and her nerves were so shaken that as she followed the procession down the aisle and out of the church, and heard the triumphal strains of the fine organ as it thundered out the opening bars of the orthodox *Wedding March*, she burst into sudden tears, to the exceeding consternation of Queenie, who was enjoying the whole affair "more than she had ever enjoyed anything in her life before!"

She quieted down, however, and sat wearily through the wedding breakfast, and listened to the speeches, and took her little sip of champagne with all due decorum; but when the "happy pair" were driven away to the station, about half-past three o'clock, and the last satin slipper was flung after the receding equipage, Dolly turned so pale and looked

so ill that Chrissie was fain to consign her to the care of Nurse, who had come from Clapham to see Master James married. There was a ball in the evening, and Queenie danced and polked as one to the manner born, while Dolly, with aching head, lay still in an upper chamber, and wondered "when it would all be over!"

It was over at last, and the Osbornes' carriage was ordered, and about eleven o'clock reached the tranquil shades of "The Acacias," Chrissie dreadfully tired out, and her husband audibly rejoicing that weddings were not of frequent occurrence.

The excitement was evidently too much for both children. Dolly was too greatly exhausted to get up till the afternoon; while Queenie, who seemed not a whit the worse for her long day's dissipation, declined to make her appearance at all in the school-room, and flatly declared that she was tired of lessons and did not mean to learn another till after her return from the seaside. And in another fortnight it was decreed that Miss Middlemore should commence her well-earned holidays and the pupils be freed from all restraint.

Another week, and they were all at Barmouth, and Queenie was exulting at the thought that she was the first to introduce the unsophisticated Dolly to the wonders of the great deep. It was a very pleasant season; the children spent hours on the wide sands, and climbing the rocks and the wooded hills of that most delightful watering-place; and nurse took them to bathe nearly every morning, and Dolly, though timid at first, soon began to enjoy the plunge and the frolic in the briny waves. As for Queenie, she learned somehow to swim like a fish, and delighted in terrifying poor nurse by going perpetually out of her depth, and tumbling and gambolling where it was impossible for any one but the bathing-woman to get at her.

Mr. Osborne stayed for the first fortnight, and, at the end of the time arranged for, came to spend a few last days, and escort his family home. Queenie was the picture of rude health, but her complexion had certainly suffered from the combined effects of sunburn and sea-breezes. Dolly was wonderfully improved in health and full of spirits, and the tan and red flush rather became her than otherwise. She

had certainly gained in flesh, too, and was altogether a different child from the weakling who had left "The Acacias" six weeks before, not to mention the marvellous change that had been wrought in appearance, and in physique generally, since those dark days in the chilly little chamber of 59, Dorchester Street. She bore home with her great spoil from beautiful Barmouth—a vast collection of shells—a present for her favourite sister Annie.



CHAPTER XI.

TALKING IT OVER.

OF course the Osbornes were no sooner re-installed in their own comfortable abode, than the question again arose as to how Dolly Derrington should be disposed of. She had passed six months, now, in the society of her friends, and Chrissie was more troubled than ever about the next act in the drama which she herself had inaugurated. Should Dolly go home to her own people at once, when, as it seemed, it was quite natural that her long, long visit should come to a conclusion, and while no kind of actual explanation could be reasonably demanded by anybody? Or, should things remain as they were? should she continue to be a member of the family in perpetuity—partly in the character of welcome guest, and partly in that of companion and schoolroom associate to the wilful, imperious daughter of the house? It must be one way or the other; it was quite impossible that the child should be partly resident in one place, and partly in another; the matter *must* be decided, and that before Miss Middlemore resumed her regular duties.

Chrissie's mind was almost painfully exercised as she sat alone on the day after her return from Barmouth, while the children were playing croquet upon the lawn. Nurse, who

had been busy all the morning, putting things to rights, had come to her mistress to inquire whether the little bed would still be wanted in the night-nursery; and it was not easy to answer this very simple question. Nurse was an old and trusted servant, but there were times when she was moved to speak her mind rather more freely than was quite desirable.

"The little bed?" echoed Mrs. Osborne, as if she did not exactly understand the query. But her tone was nervous, as well as interrogatory.

"Yes, ma'am, the little brass bedstead that was brought down from the spare attic for Miss Dolly when she was about coming here to be nursed. Will it have to remain where it is?"

"It had better stay where it is for the present," replied Chrissie, still in that undecided tone, which betokened much hesitancy and perplexity of spirit; "she will have to sleep still in the night-nursery, unless we put her in the little blue-room—and I doubt if that would be expedient."

"It *depends*, ma'am," returned Nurse, reflectively. "It would scarcely be worth while to make any change if the young lady is to go back to Dorchester Street within a week, or a few days; but, if she is to stay on—and on—the blue-room would suit as well as any."

"The puzzle is, about her staying longer on her present footing. I don't quite know how to act, Nurse, and that is the plain truth. I feel that we *ought* to keep little Dolly Derrington altogether, or not detain her any longer from her own people."

"And, indeed, ma'am, that's what I've been thinking for ever so long. If you'll forgive me, I must say that it isn't any real kindness to use her to all sorts of prettinesses and comforts that she'll feel the miss of for many a day. It isn't good to pet even animals, and then turn them out upon the world to fare as best they can."

"That is hardly an illustration of Dolly's case, I think; we have scarcely *petted* the child, except, indeed, during her illness; and the worst that can befall her is to be discontented with the old life that once was well enough."

"That's true enough, ma'am; and, so far, no great harm

is done, I hope. And it is a puzzle, look which way you will. Would it be the right thing to take little Miss Der-
rington and make a lady of her, while her brothers and
sisters are left to something not much better than poverty?
It seems to me it doesn't often answer—the separating of
one member of a family from all the rest; and in this case
it must be separation. The day may come, too, when you
don't want Miss Dolly, and Miss Dolly mayn't want you,
for there's no counting upon anything for certain in this
troublesome world, except, as my mother used to say, it's
'death and taxes!' And so the little girl will grow up a
sort of *amphibious* young woman—neither in one station
nor the other. I think everybody should know their true
position, and you should either get right out of a humble
station—if you've the chance, and Providence brings it
about—or else you should be content to keep in it. But
there, I'm talking nonsense, I dare say. I just mean it
should be the one thing or the other; go-between-ways never
prosper; and I am sure I beg your pardon, ma'am, for
presuming to put in my word—and only a servant's word."

"Tell me honestly, Nurse, if the decision were left to
you, how you would act?"

"There, I should be in a puzzle, just as you are. As for
the child herself, I never knew a nicer. She is one of the
best-behaved, sweetest-natured little things I ever knew. If
I had a little cottage of my own, and could do exactly as I
pleased, there's nobody I'd like better to adopt than little
Miss Dolly; but then, ma'am, your position—and mine,
that maybe, if ever I give up service—are quite two
different things. My station in life and hers would not be
so far apart, and I should be bound to give her advantages,
so that she might *rise*; for I hold that everybody who can
rise should rise, and that by merit, and by dint of putting
the best foot foremost. Our minister was saying the other
day, when he lectured on '*Progress*,' that we can't stand
still in this world, if we would, and he don't believe we
shall in the next. Anyway, we must either get better or
worse, or richer or poorer, or higher or lower, while we live
our lives on earth. The moment we pause and say we'll go
no further, we shall begin to slip back, and lose a little, and

then a little more ground ; nobody ends life exactly as they began it, and I see that we've the making or marring of our fortunes very much in our own hands ; for Providence—as a rule that is, if not quite always—helps those most that help themselves. But that's neither here nor there ; only I do say, that if I had a child of my own, or if I took one, I'd put it in the way to rise honestly. I should like to think that those that came after me would get a step further up the ladder than I had been able to. A lot might be made of the little girl, I'm sure, if she had her chances, with high or low ; and if she does go, ma'am, I, for one, shall be very sorry, for she gives next to no trouble, and never presumes or takes a liberty, and is as biddable as ever she can be."

"She is, indeed, a very good and pleasant child. I do think I should miss her dreadfully out of the house ; and I attach no little importance to your verdict, Nurse, for I have proved the soundness of your judgment too often not to value it."

"It is very good of you to say so, ma'am. I've done my best, I do believe, to serve you faithfully, and to make your interests mine ; but then, good mistresses make good servants. My life wouldn't have been of much account if I hadn't had good places."

"Mistresses have a good deal to answer for, as well as maids, I am sure, Nurse. Just as in married life, as much depends upon the wife as upon the husband."

"Good wives make good husbands, you would say, ma'am ?"

"I believe they do. Of course there are exceptions. There are men, as doubtless there are women, who seem to have a natural tendency to go wrong—weak men and profligate men, whom no wife could possibly reform. And yet I feel convinced that a good woman's influence—her power properly exercised—is *all* but boundless."

"So it is, ma'am ; so it is, I am certain. Though, to be sure, I've no right to speak, because I was a wife only for one short year, and a mother but for a little month. I might have turned out good or bad for aught anybody can say, but I wasn't tried. Still, I do think we women have

the shaping of our married lives, much more than a great many people believe. A woman who doesn't make the best and brightest of her home, and the very most of her husband, is sure one way or another to come to grief, whether she belongs to the upper or to the working classes. More than this, a man can't 'get on,' as we say, if his wife isn't on his side. And a wife may pinch, and scrape, and scrub and scour, and make a Christian profession ; and yet be no help-meet, but rather a hindrance."

"A terrible hindrance, indeed ! You ought to write a book on the conduct of young wives. But to come back to the question with which we started—I think you may leave the little bed where it has remained so long ;—unless it be really in your way."

"It's in my way so much that I shall not like to part with it. I shall miss the dear child dreadfully, once she's gone for good and all, to that miserable house in Dorchester Street. The mother-tenderness has never quite gone out of my heart, for all my one baby has been over thirty years in her little grave. Once a mother always a mother."

"That is settled for the present, then. And to-night, when the children are gone to rest, I will put the matter fully and plainly before Mr. Osborne ; of course, it is for him to say yea or nay. I have left it too long ; I intended coming to a final understanding while we were at Barmouth, but something always intervened to prevent it. I think to-morrow I shall be able to give you our decision."

And nurse went away ; and evening came, and the little girls were summoned to the nursery rather earlier than usual. But Chrissie Osborne found it no easy task to force her husband to a definite settlement. He did not in the least want to get rid of Dolly, and her father evidently was well satisfied that things should continue as they were ; above all, Queenie would not get on half so well without her.

And Chrissie firmly, though mildly, replied, "Jonathan, it is not a question of our own child. Queenie will be safe and happy, whatever be our decision. We have to a large extent taken upon ourselves Dolly's future. Do you not see that we have no right to play fast and loose with her destiny ? She must be received as one of ourselves ; this

must be her *home* ; or before many days she must go back to Brixton."

And then Mrs. Osborne talked seriously of the responsibility that must be at once declined, or else finally accepted ; and Mr. Osborne became a little cross, for he quite perceived that the point was a critical one, and ought no longer to be evaded ; and he did not quite like being forced to be definite. Mrs. Fairfax had had her say before ; and, true to her promise, had "spoken faithfully" to her brother, with the result of putting him quite out of temper, without bringing him to any settled conclusion."

"Perhaps, after all, the child has not any objection to going back," he said, presently ; "she is always talking about her sister Annie—about all her sisters, indeed."

"Not too appreciatively, I am afraid ; and really, I should be disappointed in her if she yearned for the society of the two who were here the other day. They are young women of a type I especially dislike ; and I found it a little difficult to treat them with the courtesy due from the mistress of the house. I think I should like to see the small sister Dolly cares for ; and perhaps it would be only wise to interview Mrs. Derrington."

"Perhaps so. You might come to some understanding with her ; Derrington himself is a most unsatisfactory person to deal with ; he is turning into a human mollusc ; he has less bones in his character than ever. I sincerely trust his wife has every penny of her property settled upon herself ; and I hope, if she is the sensible, right-minded person he represents her to be, she will take the whip-hand, and not let him kick over the traces, as he does now and then, when he has not the sagacity to know his own mind, or the firmness to refuse to '*lend his name*' to an impecunious friend. My dear, you must go to Dorchester Street again, and ascertain for yourself how the land lies in every respect. I think I shall wash my hands of the perplexity. I will leave it all to you ; I can trust your discretion ; you will do that which is best and fittest for Queenie."

"For Queenie again ! You may be positive, Jonathan, I shall never, as far as my reason serves me, do anything to her detriment ; but I hesitate to accept the entire responsi-

bility of the arrangement. I must be quite certain in my own mind that I am doing the very best for Dolly, as well as for Queenie—that in days to come she may never feel that she was the victim of a bargain—a transaction.”

“I don’t see how harm of any kind can come of the ‘transaction,’ as you call it. Of course, she will have every advantage; she will share all Queenie’s studies, as well as her pleasures; she shall have as liberal an education as her best friends could desire. And when she grows up she shall not go to her husband quite empty-handed; that is to say, if she marry a decent fellow, of whom we can thoroughly approve.”

“Do you know, Jonathan, I am half afraid that there will be the great difficulty. Certainly we can take care that she is a lady bred, and that her mind be well cultivated; but——”

“But what now, Chrissie? You are really a little aggravating! What is to hinder Dolly marrying comfortably? Of course she is extremely plain, when seen side by side with our bonnie Regina; but I fancy as many pretty girls remain old maids as ugly ones; and, as I said, a few hundreds shall not stand in her way.”

“I was not thinking of her lack of beauty. She is plain, now, certainly—very plain, at times; but do you know, my dear, I am not at all certain but that she will turn out a fine woman? She has not bad features, and her complexion may mend; education—culture will impart more expression to her face. I should not be surprised if, at thirty, Dolly Derrington should be very good-looking, if not positively handsome.”

“What, then, are your misgivings, Chrissie? With good looks, a fine figure, a comfortable little *dot*, and the accomplishments of a lady, what *should* hinder her making a desirable and happy marriage?”

“The mere fact that she will not move in the society to which she rightfully belongs. Bred as a lady and accustomed to the life of one, she will care only for such a man as we should deem a suitable match for Queenie. Except in the matter of fortune, her claims and Queenie’s may not differ so very widely; indeed, if Queenie is to have plenty

of money it is not necessary that her husband should be exceptionally rich."

"You mean, I suppose, that Dolly, when her time comes, will be pretty sure to encourage no suitor who is not a gentleman? Well! why should she? I shall take good care that only gentlemen—men of character and position—have the *entrée*, here, as the girls become marriageable. What difficulty would you suggest? It is not by any means likely that they will both make the same selection; they will be as diverse in mind as in person, I am well persuaded."

"I fancy they will; but, Jonathan, will any gentleman—any real gentleman, that is—care to connect himself with Dolly's family? We should scarcely have welcomed Emily as a daughter, had she possessed such objectionable, such unproduceable relatives, rather. What should we say to John, or to Oliver, if they paid attentions to girls who were hampered with such sisters as the Derrington girls?"

"I had not thought of that, Chrissie," rejoined Mr. Osborne, thoughtfully; "women see farther and more clearly than men, I must confess. And you cannot separate a woman from her belongings—at least, I suppose you ought not. But, why need we provide for the marriage of two such mere children?—they will prefer dolls and skipping-ropes to lovers for many a day; you women are so fond of match-making. I dare say you drew an ideal sketch of Queenie's possible husband, before she was a day old."

"I do not think I did, Jonathan; though we mothers have foolish proclivities, where our daughters are concerned, I know; and, perhaps, it is my weakness to consider far-off possibilities as well as nearer probabilities. But if you really incline to the project of adoption I certainly will not oppose you—I sometimes think we have gone too far to recede, with perfect justice. We can restore Dolly to her sordid little home, and in some sense she will undoubtedly go back enriched, in more ways than one; but we cannot restore her old self; she will never be entirely contented with her former sphere, nor am I quite certain that she is constitutionally able to 'rough it,' in common

with the rest of the family, especially after having been delicately nurtured with us for so long a period. So, if you think it not unwise, or unkind to take the little one permanently, God forbid that I should stand in your way. Only, do not make me responsible."

"Well, let's see how the wind blows! Do you go and see Mrs. Derrington, and make what terms you see fit. I will have a little chat with Queenie, and find out precisely which way her inclinations tend."

And nothing more was said that evening; but in the morning Mr. Osborne, finding his daughter very busy rifling the greenhouses, asked her carelessly what she would do when she was left companionless. She put down her basket and the scissors rather abruptly, and replied, "Companionless, father! does that mean without Dolly?"

"Of course it does; Dolly has paid us a pretty long visit, I think; it is about time she went home to Brixton, if she is to go at all."

Queenie stood still, and meditated for almost a minute—a very long time for Miss Osborne to ponder any observation, for she was not at all given to reflection. At last, she responded, "But why should she go at all? She can't like that wretched place, and her vulgar, disagreeable sisters so much as she likes us and 'The Acacias,' I'm sure. I could tell that when she went to Dorchester Street to bid them all 'good-bye' before we went to Barmouth; I am sure she was right glad to get back here again."

"What did she say, Queenie? Do you remember?"

"Yes; she said how very small the rooms were, and how dreadfully steep the stairs, and how funny it was to have only a little back-yard to play in. But things are nicer than they used to be, she admits—a good deal nicer; and the step-mother she was so afraid of is kind to Annie, and is teaching her to play the piano, and to sing lots of hymns, and Annie likes it. And there is a servant, too, now—only *one*, though! What must it be like not to have plenty of servants, and plenty of room to run about in? Dolly said again, you couldn't 'swing a cat' in the parlour; and, of course, she couldn't swing herself if she wanted to—not even in what she calls the back-yard, that Mrs. Derrington

has tried to turn into a garden—only nothing would grow for the want of air and sunshine. Yes; I'm sure Dolly was glad to get back to her new home; she ran upstairs as fast as she could go, and then jumped down again two steps at a time, and cried out, 'Oh, now I can breathe—how nice it is to live in such a large airy house!'"

"Then you don't want Dolly to go back to Brixton to live?"

"Of course not; I've told Dolly she is *never* to go back, unless she gets downright disagreeable, like Louisa Templeton; and I'm not sure I care so much about Maggie as I did—she gives herself such airs."

"And Dolly does not give herself airs?"

"No, never; she always does as I wish, and plays at the plays I choose, and she is scarcely ever cross. And the schoolroom would be horrid without her, to say nothing of the time that we have all to ourselves when we are not bothered with lessons."

"*Bothered*, Queenie? That is not a nice word for a little girl, and I thought you loved your lessons, and had made up your mind to grow into a clever and accomplished woman; mother was afraid you were working quite too hard before the holidays."

"Perhaps I was, for I got dreadfully tired of it all. I don't mean to work so hard again; I shall take it easy when Miss Middlemore comes back."

"Why so? I hope, Queenie, you are not going to be idle?"

"No, not idle; but—but—I don't see why I should bother—I mean trouble myself about some things; I'm not going to be a governess, and Maggie Courtnay says——"

"Well, what does that redoubtable young lady say on the question, Queenie?"

"She says that neither she nor I need learn a bit more than it pleases us to learn. *We* are going to be young ladies of fortune, and we shall not have to get our own living in any way. It is all very well for girls that have no prospects to study hard, and know lots of things, for they have nothing before them but to turn governesses if they

care to be at all genteel ; it isn't genteel to dress-make, or be in shops, you know."

"Really I did not know, Queenie ; I cannot pretend to Miss Maggie's superfine powers of discrimination ; the wonder is, where she learnt so much worldly wisdom, for I fancy she is not quite twelve years old."

"She is not so much—she will not be *ten* till next November ; but she is the youngest of the Misses Courtnay, you know, and two of them are quite grown up—*introduced*, as they say ; and two are at school in Paris being finished, for I quite understand that one must learn French properly, if one is to be anybody in the world. Matilda and Isabella were at the same school a little while ago."

"And who may Matilda and Isabella be ? I think I have not the honour of their acquaintance."

"I think you must have seen them, father, for I often meet them walking in the High Street, or on the Pavement ; but they don't go to our church."

"I dare say not, Queenie ; they would be dreadfully ashamed of being Dissenters—Nonconformists, rather—because they are so very *genteel*."

"Are not Nonconformists genteel, then ?"

"Some of them are, I am sorry to say. There are one or two families in our own church who are as 'genteel' as they know how to be."

"Don't you like them to be genteel ?"

"No, I do not, my Queenie ; I abominate gentility, as it is commonly professed, though the primary meaning of the word is a very different one from that which it has obtained at present. There are two words I do not like you to get into the habit of using, and these are *ladylike* and *genteel* !"

"Oh, father ! But Miss Middlemore said the same thing, I remember. I thought everybody ought to be 'ladylike.'"

"And so, in a sense, they ought, my dear. You ought never to do anything that is *unladylike*, certainly ; but people who pride themselves on their 'gentility' have rather inadequate notions of what is really *ladylike* ! Be a lady, my Queenie, not merely the semblance of one ; or,

rather, be a gentlewoman, which is by far the higher standing."

"I thought they were both the same?"

"No. Any woman who dresses finely enough, and does not outrage the opinions of 'genteel' society by undertaking what would be called *menial* employment expects to take rank as a lady, no matter how badly educated she may be, nor how uncultured. All the women who flaunt in silk and feathers, and drive about in carriages, are not gentlewomen; but many such walk on foot, even in the rain. A great many thousands a year cannot make a gentlewoman, though they may help to make a 'lady,' or what the world generally esteems such."

"Is mother a *gentlewoman*?"

"That she is—and the highest and best type of one, into the bargain. She values people for what they are, not for what they have, nor for the position they enjoy. She is always kind and courteous; she never pretends to be otherwise than she really is, and she is never ashamed of having been once comparatively poor. She was not less a gentlewoman when she kept only one maid, and that not a very efficient one, and when she lived in a small house, in a quiet little street, not much more fashionable than Dorchester Street. And she does not despise people simply because they are lowly born; she was only a farmer's daughter herself."

"We had but *one* maid, you say?"

"We had only one for the first few years of our married life, and for awhile that one was our good and faithful Nurse, whom I hope you will always love and respect, my Queenie. And for many years I took the omnibus into the City, and did not 'set up my carriage,' as people say, till I felt that I could honestly afford it, and that I had earned a right to take my ease a little, and to give your mother a few extra comforts and some luxuries. *She* deserves them all, for she has been a downright good wife; I only hope your brothers may be as fortunate—as *blessed*—as I have been, for a good wife is from the Lord."

"I shall be a wife some day, shall I not?"

"If you live to be a woman, and God orders it so, you

will be, I dare say ; but we need not think about that for many a day yet. Your care must be at present to behave as a good little daughter at home should ; to be a good docile pupil to Miss Middlemore, and to be kind and sisterly to Dolly Derrington, if, indeed, we conclude to keep her with us always."

"And Aunt Rachel—is she a gentlewoman?"

"Aunt Rachel is a truly good woman, and my very dear sister, Queenie. I should be much vexed if she were not treated with all affection and respect under my roof, where she is always a most welcome guest."

"But she is not what Nurse calls 'so well off,' is she, father?"

"No. Her husband was not a very successful man. He left her decently provided for, but not wealthy ; and she has had her boys to bring up, for your Uncle Fairfax died when he was comparatively young. But, Queenie, rich or poor, your aunt has always made the very best of her real self ; she has never made pretensions to be what she is not ; she has not a particle of *sham* in her whole composition. If she is not exactly of refined gold, she is of the very truest metal—genuine, without alloy. Love your auntie, little one ; love her next to your mother and father, and always give ear to her counsel—for it is wise and safe."

"But I was not born in the little house you were telling me about, was I ? I never remember any place but Clapham, and I have looked at the Common, and our beautiful trees, and the shining pools of water, all my life."

"Yes, you have ; you were born at 'The Acacias,' sure enough. And, for that matter, so was Philip: I bought this property a little while before he was born—when Herbert was quite a baby. It had pleased God to prosper me greatly in business, and I thought I ought to better my position for the sake of my family, as well as for myself. For I hold that it is a Christian father's duty to leave his children in more prosperous circumstances than those which fell to his own early lot. And your mother had a good deal to do with what the world sometimes calls my *luck* ! For a man can hardly prosper in life unless his wife and he pull right together—remember that, little one."

"Yes, father, I'll try to remember. Shall I tell Maggie that it is—well, silly to be genteel?"

"No, my dear, leave Maggie to herself and to her own instructors. I am afraid I have been talking over your head all this time; you will understand better before long. But don't listen to Miss Maggie when she advises you to qualify yourself for a life of ease and plenty only. Changes come every day—fathers die, banks fail, riches take to themselves wings and fly away. Let not Maggie persuade you to rely on your present good fortune. There is an old couplet, which says—

" 'When land is gone, and money spent,
Then learning is most excellent.' "

The Courtnay girls may all have to work for their living—someday."

And Mr. Osborne privately thought of rumours that had reached his ears. There had been whispers afloat on the Stock Exchange, for Mr. Courtnay was well known to be a daring, though tolerably prudent, speculator, and doubts had been freely expressed as to his perfect solvency. But, of course, Mr. Osborne said nothing of this to his little daughter. He had not even mentioned the subject to his wife. Only he felt that he wished these "genteel" Courtnays lived a hundred miles away, and that Queenie and Maggie might have fewer opportunities for conversation—there was only about a furlong of the Common between Overstone House and "The Acacias." He was not at all sorry to hear Queenie say that her pleasure in Maggie's society's was abating. Yes; it would undoubtedly be good for his own child, as well as for Dolores, that she should remain permanently a member of his household. In fact, he made up his mind, there and then, to adopt the little girl into his family; there should be no further question on the subject.

And he felt his own resolve strengthen, as Queenie chattered on, while they paraded the garden-walks together; for she became quite communicative on the topic of Maggie Courtnay's worldly wisdom. She and Queenie had talked it well over, and it had been decided that a "young lady of position" need never trouble herself about the future.

Matilda's and Isabella's opinions had been duly retailed, and the conclusion had been arrived at, *not* to "bother" themselves with too much book-learning, but to practise well and get a good French accent ; to be content to play brilliantly and dance gracefully, and speak French fluently, and be, on the whole, pleasing and ornamental.

CHAPTER XII.

FINALLY SETTLED.

AND so it was decided, to the satisfaction of the whole family of the Osbornes, that Dolores should no more go back to her old home at Brixton, but take up her abode at "The Acacias" "for good and all" as Queenie's school-room mate and adopted sister. Only there still remained Mr. and Mrs. Derrington to be consulted.

"Say and seal" was always Mr. Osborne's motto ; when he had cautiously weighed his scheme, and resolved upon it, he was never slow to carry it into execution. He deliberated tardily, but resolved promptly ; and having once made his decision, lost no time in acting upon it. As Mrs. Fairfax often said to her sister-in-law, "Jonathan never lets the grass grow under his feet when once he has come to a conclusion."

So that same morning, having dismissed both Queenie and Dolly to the schoolroom with a charge to look out their books and be in readiness for Miss Middlemore, who would be at her post in a few days, Jonathan said to his wife, "I have fully made up my mind, Chrissie, Queenie herself has settled the business ; from henceforth, Dolly Derrington shall live with us and be our own child. I charge myself with whatever responsibility may be incurred."

"I am glad you have decided ; but I suppose we have

still to come to an understanding with the child's natural guardians. We cannot exactly confiscate her, so to speak."

"Oh, that will be a very slight affair. To tell the truth, I did sound Derrington before I went back for the last time to Barmouth, and he seemed quite ready and willing to leave her with us for weeks, or months, or years!—as long as it pleased us—or *for ever*, I suppose. He is evidently supremely indifferent to the fate of his youngest daughter—I am not sure that he has a strong affection for any of his children; all his love and devotion was for their mother, his first wife. He will be thankful, I have no doubt, to be relieved of the burden of one girl—and that the most delicate, and, I really believe, the most uncared-for of them all. He is not a man of many words, but he has let drop some which lead me to suspect that he has never forgiven poor little Dolly for being, to some extent, the innocent author of her mother's decease. No; I don't think he will have the slightest objection to our taking his Dolores—his 'child of sorrow,' as he has called her more than once in my hearing—entirely off his hands. However, I'll have him into my private room this very day, and he must at once accept or decline the offer I shall make him."

"I have no idea that he will decline; I fancy that he will not hesitate thankfully to accept. But there is a Mrs. Derrington now, and she surely ought to be somewhat considered?"

"Exactly; though I should say she *can* have no objection. If she were Dolly's own mother, it would be quite another affair; for a mother is a mother all the world over, whether she lives in Windsor Castle or in Spitalfields—or, at least, ought to be. But Mrs. Derrington, of Dorchester Street, won't want the additional burden of a fourth step-daughter; three must be quite as many as she can manage, depend upon it."

"No doubt. Then do you wish me to see Mrs. Derrington, or will you leave it to her husband to communicate the proposal?"

"I leave you to interview Mrs. Derrington; you will understand her far better than Derrington himself would, I dare say. We hear that she is a really sensible woman,

and two sensible women, however widely different be their circumstances, cannot fail to come to a mutual comprehension of each other. It is a fine morning; you had better go to-day. What time shall I tell Thomas to come round for you?"

"At no time, thank you; I prefer to walk. I may be delayed in Dorchester Street, you know—one can scarcely hurry such a conversation as we must have, and I should not like to keep Thomas and the horses waiting indefinitely. The exercise will only be good for me, and if I feel at all fatigued, I can charter a cab at the rank in Brixton Road."

"Very well; so be it, then. Now I must be off, or I shall not be able to manage half-an-hour for private business, as I expect the Australian mails will be in to-day."

Mr. Osborne forthwith took his departure, for he could never brook the notion of being late at the office; he was so punctual a man that his clerks looked for him as regularly as they listened for the striking of St. Paul's. Mrs. Osborne duly ordered dinner, and bade Nurse take the children for a long walk to Tooting Common, and then she set off herself to pay her visit—to make her appearance for the third time at "59, Dorchester Street."

She did not find the walk at all too much for her; nevertheless, she felt glad to reach her destination, and devoutly hoped that the newly-married lady might be at home. She felt that she needed a long rest; moreover, she sincerely desired that the business on hand might be speedily concluded.

She looked up at No. 59 as she approached it, and thought how much more respectable it looked than during the reign of the late Miss Derrington. There were clean lace curtains in the parlour window, and the upper windows were all thrown wide open. The doorsteps were newly whitened, and the rusty scraper, to which Queenie had once objected, was replaced by a new one; altogether the small house had quite a prosperous aspect as far as regarded the exterior, and Chrissie doubted not that she would find improvements inside as well as out.

A respectable, sturdy maid-servant answered her double knock at the carefully black-leaded rapper, and it was ascertained that Mrs. Derrington *was* at home, and was also "disengaged." So once more Mrs. Osborne found herself in the little parlour where it was so utterly impossible to "swing a cat." But though the small room was as small as ever, and perhaps a little fuller of furniture than before, it was scrupulously clean and neat; the chairs and tables shone with honest "elbow-grease," clearly; the grate was well polished and filled with ferns and ivies; the stuffiness was all gone, and the want of air no longer suggested a locked-up store-closet or a family coffer. In a very few minutes Mrs. Derrington appeared, and cordially, yet respectfully, welcomed her visitor.

She was a large-made woman, with homely features, and very plainly, though by no means shabbily, dressed. Her hair was slightly grey; her mouth and chin denoted firmness without obstinacy or harshness; her eyes were soft and dark, though of no particular colour, but they were luminous and well opened, and the whole expression of her face was kind and motherly, thoughtful, and very gentle. Her voice, too, was singularly mellow and sweet, and she spoke with much clearness and precision, and spoke also with the accent of an educated person. Chrissie was at once struck and delighted with her whole appearance, and wondered within herself whatever so superior a woman could have seen to appreciate in Mr. Derrington.

"I am come," began Mrs. Osborne, after greetings had been duly exchanged, "on a matter that I am sure will deeply interest you. I want to speak to you about the little daughter who has been our inmate for so long a time—your daughter, Dolores, or Dolly, as she is commonly called. Should you at all object to leave her with us still—and entirely, for the future?—Mr. Derrington, of course, consenting?"

"Mr. Derrington would not object, I am pretty certain, for, to be plain, we have talked the matter over between ourselves more than once or twice of late. I had begun to be extremely anxious about little Dolly; not but what I was assured of your great kindness and your consideration on

her account ; yet I began to fear that her present life would ill qualify her for the station she must be called upon to occupy when she returned to her own family. My husband's children cannot afford to be idle or self-indulgent ; they must work in some way or other for their living, and our present income, even when supplemented with what I am very happy to be able to contribute to the general fund, though allowing some additional comforts and a few extra things that are not quite superfluities, leaves no margin at all for luxuries. And Dolly must have grown habituated, long ere this, to a great deal that must appear to you and yours as mere common necessities, but which can never be at our command."

"To speak quite frankly, Mrs. Derrington, I had the same misgivings myself ; and before we quite decided upon including the child as a settled member of our family—'*adopting*' her, I may say—I feared very much whether our intended kindness might not result in actual cruelty. So dual a life as she must have led between two distinctly constituted homes cannot be good for any person, especially for a child, who can hardly be expected to possess an evenly-balanced mind and character. However, I trust the problem is solved at last, and to your satisfaction, as well as to our own."

"Of course I rejoice in the good fortune of any of my stepchildren. The elder girls I meant to benefit if possible, and to be very patient with them, for I need scarcely say they require no small amount of the exercise of that desirable virtue ; but Annie and Dolly, the little ones, I did hope to make quite my own. I hoped to win their love and their entire confidence, and I had resolved to do my very utmost on their account. But if I may be satisfied in a few particulars—if you will be good enough to explain your intentions towards the child, I feel assured that I shall willingly relinquish Dolly to your generous protection."

"There is nothing at all '*generous*' in our conduct ; we are simply pleasing ourselves in befriending Dolly ; we have become very fond of her, and should miss her sadly if her place were vacant at our hearth. At the same time, Mrs. Derrington, we are not merely retaining her for our own satis-

faction, but we fully recognise our responsibilities, as regards her future life. Understand, please, that we have no thought of *patronising* her, though we take upon ourselves the full expense of her maintenance in every particular—of her education, and of her future establishment, giving her every advantage, and every comfort, and—I don't say *all*—but much of the love and tenderness we give to our child."

"I should be a very foolish person, Mrs. Osborne, and a terribly selfish one, if I hesitated to give my full consent to little Dolly's transfer; for you will do for her what, with all goodwill and striving, it is quite impossible for me to effect. And, indeed, if the truth must be spoken—and I am sure that you feel that the plain truth is always the best—I should refuse my consent in vain, for my husband has from the first most ardently desired that which has really come to pass. He *hoped*, after the first week, that you might retain Dolly as your own. He has never expressed a proper paternal affection for the poor little thing; only he was not a little anxious that you should come to a definite conclusion, lest, as he said, she should be returned to us 'spoiled with luxury.' I know he will not offer the smallest opposition to the arrangement, once he is satisfied that the child is entirely off his hands. You perceive I speak without reserve; I want you clearly to understand how much it is that you accept from us, and precisely what it is that you receive."

"I believe I do understand, and so does Mr. Osborne; we, at least, are quite satisfied with our part of the bargain—if such it may be called."

"May I ask what sort of education you intend to give Dolores?"

"What would you advise?"

"I should advise such an education as would qualify her—if necessary or expedient—to depend upon her own resources. If she had remained my charge, I should have strained every nerve to afford her *solid* advantages. I could not have secured to her many accomplishments; but I should have tried to teach her, or have her taught, everything most thoroughly. I should have built what I could—what God enabled me to build—on a firm and durable

foundation, on which she herself could raise, in days to come, such a building as would be to her own satisfaction and benefit. And if I might be permitted—if you would excuse my boldness—I would say, let her be in all things well taught; let her be a useful, cultured, well-read, well-informed Christian woman—anything, rather than a fashionable fine lady! There is one little thing more—what do you intend shall be her relations with her own family?”

“Mrs. Derrington, may I speak quite candidly?”

“I ask only for candour. Whatever may be your reply I shall not be offended, though I may experience some disappointment.”

“I do not wish to separate the child entirely from her own kith and kin; but I should not wish her to have very frequent intercourse with her elder sisters. See her yourself as often as you desire, and I should not like to prevent her from seeing her father or her sister Annie pretty often; but I should dread in many ways the influence and example of Mrs. Chapman and Miss Nellie and to some extent that of Maggie and Jennie.”

“Neither Maggie nor Jennie are really naughty girls. Kitty and Nellie have done them no good, but I hope I shall soon come to a better understanding with them, and be able to be of use to both. I cannot pretend to deplore the departure of Kitty and Nellie; they were insufferably arrogant and insolent, and did their utmost to incite their juniors to rebellion. I should have stood but a poor chance of working out the reforms I knew were needed in the family had they remained. We should have been always liable to sudden outbreaks and perpetual squabbles, to a chronic state of guerilla warfare, to something like a sort of ‘deadly feud.’ I do not despair of Maggie and Jennie becoming all that I could wish—in time. Annie is a good, docile little thing, and a great comfort to me already. God helping me, and granting the needful wisdom, I am hoping to make a woman of her, for she has an excellent disposition, and plenty of sound good sense; she will, I believe, be a blessing to her father and myself, to all her family, if not to the world at large in which she lives.”

"I have been thinking, Mrs. Derrington, whether it would not be kind and *right* to let Dolly, child as she is, have a voice in the decision which is so much to affect her after life. If my husband sees with me, and you approve, I should like her to spend a few days with you in her own old home, and under the new *régime*, which I feel sure you have done your best to establish—explaining to her, of course, that she was returning to us, not exactly as a visitor, but as a permanency. If she, of her own free choice, elect to remain here, I am sure we ought not to constrain her; the plan ought to be abandoned. Though I must confess that in such event I should be extremely disappointed, and so would Mr. Osborne, and so would my little Queenie, and my sons at home, who make quite a pet of Dolly. What do you say?"

"It would be just what I could wish; though I may never live under the same roof again with my small step-daughter, I should like to know that I had a place in her heart. You may be sure that I shall exercise my influence, if any be required, in the right direction. I am afraid Mr. Derrington will scarcely permit her to have a choice at all; he will not hear of her being allowed to give up the chance of so much good-fortune. Still, I am sure, a few days of Dolly's society would be most acceptable to us all; my Annie would be in a seventh heaven of delight at the prospect; she has sadly missed her favourite sister, and during the summer, while Dolly was at the seaside, she positively pined for her return."

"They shall have regular opportunities of meeting. And, Mrs. Derrington, there is one thing more to be considered, and that is the question of religion. We are Nonconformists, and that not merely by inheritance, as it were, from our parents, but from strong and rooted conviction. We could not promise that Dolores should be brought up in any other faith than our own; we—that is, Mr. Osborne and our sons and myself—are members of a Congregational church; so is Mrs. Fairfax, my sister-in-law, and all her family; so, indeed, are all our trusted and confidential servants. I do not hold with differing faiths in one household; it is well to be 'all of one accord,' and con-

tributes more than anything to the harmony and peace of the whole family."

"There cannot possibly be any difficulty on that score. Mr. Derrington was brought up among the Baptists, and his first wife was of that communion; but after her death, and since the girls began to grow up, he has—well, contracted somewhat careless habits. Kitty and Nelly began by persuading him that it did not matter to what denomination one belonged, and that 'Church,' as they called the Establishment, was so much more fashionable, more distinguished, and more entertaining than Dissent; and so after a while they drifted quite away from their old form of worship."

"And yourself, Mrs. Derrington?"

"My late husband was a Wesleyan; my parents were Congregationalists or Independents of the good old-fashioned sort. When Mr. Derrington proposed, I at once gave him to understand that I neither would nor could dream of relinquishing my Nonconformist principles—for I consider all as Nonconformists who protest against State control in religion. My husband at once promised that I should be entirely free to follow my own faith, and that he would willingly attend with me the church I preferred. So we have gone together every Sunday ever since our marriage, and so has Annie. The elder girls, of course, I do not seek to coerce, and only indirectly to influence."

"Mrs. Chapman told Dolly that she was 'going in' for 'High Church,' as being *next* door to Roman Catholicism, and quite as good, if not superior in many ways—since Anglicanism does not involve one in losing *caste*, whereas Romanism very often does."

"Poor, foolish children! If it were not that they are going out of the way of getting good, I should trouble myself very little about their caprices. I am afraid Kitty and Nellie both regard religious exercises as a sort of entertainment; their service is a kind of Sunday opera, and the music, they assure me, is 'as good as any first-rate concert!' As for Kitty's husband, he very seldom attends any sort of Divine worship; she married him in absolute defiance of her father, who knew well that the young man had con-

tracted dissolute habits, and was in no wise to be trusted with the happiness of any woman. Unfortunately, he inherited a nice little property several years ago, into which he has made sad inroads already. He is under no control, and thinks of nothing but jollity and amusement; I am afraid his prosperity will very speedily come to an end, for he frequents the racecourse, is intimate with betting-men, and is *not always sober*! I fear poor Kitty will not be long in finding out that the bed she has made for herself is a most uneasy one. I think she may be very thankful to come back to her old home, which she despises now; only, her father has vowed, almost sworn, that she shall nevermore cross his threshold."

"Was she not married with his consent?"

"No; she wedded Fred Chapman in bold defiance of Mr. Derrington's command, and the arrangements were all made in secrecy. The banns were put up at the parish church, but no one seemed to know anything about it, and no one thought it worth while to interfere. Maggie and Jennie guessed what was impending, but they kept their own counsel, and no one knew that the marriage had actually taken place till the bridal party returned to the house, and kept high festival for a couple of hours, and proved that they did not belong to any Temperance Society. When my husband returned from business he was informed of the elopement—if one may call it so—of his *two* eldest daughters."

"There was something said about a dressmaking business?"

"Yes; and the girls persuaded their poor father out of a nice little sum of money; but it was done by stratagem. The last time I saw Nellie, she confessed that she repented of the bargain she had made; and I told her that if at any time she felt it incumbent on her to separate herself from her disreputable brother-in-law, there would always be a home for her under her father's roof, provided she were amenable to lawful authority. As for Mrs. Chapman, I could not possibly receive her, except under the most urgent circumstances; a married woman must throw in her lot with her husband. But, really, Mrs. Osborne, I don't know why

I have troubled you with all this ; only, perhaps, it is just as well that you should know something about Dolly's nearest relatives."

"I think it is well for those relatives that Mr. Derrington made a second choice."

"I hope it will be well for them. I mean, God helping me, to be a good mother to all my husband's children. Maggie and Jennie are certainly less estranged, and my dear little Annie is very happy. Their father, too, is undoubtedly much more comfortable, and takes his proper place in his own house. It was a bad day for those poor girls when they were left to bring up themselves ; there are greater allowances to be made for them than one would at all imagine. But Jennie and Maggie shall have every chance ; and for the little ones I have the brightest anticipations."

"Then we have your full consent, if we have Mr. Derrington's ; and Dolly is to be our own child ?"

"I can only feel most thankful that she should be so well provided for. Now that you guarantee her future, I am glad that she has spent so much time in her new home, and has found so much happiness at 'The Acacias.' I saw plainly enough that she would not be contented with us again, when she came to wish us good-bye before she went to Barmouth."

"Nevertheless, I think she will be very much pleased to spend a little time once more with her own family, and I will take good care that she is not altogether separated from Annie. May I not see your little girl ?"

"With pleasure. She is just come in ; I had sent her out on an errand. Maggie and Jennie are gone shopping as far as the 'Elephant and Castle.'"

Annie came in immediately, at her stepmother's summons, and, just as she was, was introduced to Mrs. Osborne. She was a delicate, refined-looking child, of about ten years old ; she was very simply, but nicely, dressed, and her manners were good and unaffected. Chrissie felt that here was one sister of whom little Dolly would never need to be ashamed. Annie was delighted beyond measure when she learned that, in all probability, Dolly was coming to pay

them a few days' "visit." She seemed quite to understand, without being told, that she was not actually leaving her home at Clapham, and that she belonged rather to Mr. and Mrs. Osborne than to her own family. And, pleased with all that she had seen, and fully approving of the new Mrs. Derrington, Chrissie Osborne took her departure.

When her husband returned home that evening, she found that everything was finally settled. Mr. Derrington had accepted, almost with rapture, Mr. Osborne's plan. He had made but one stipulation, and that was that Dolly should not be sent or taken out of the country without his acquiescence, and that she should be allowed to visit her own relations, say *once a-year*! To which Mr. Osborne had unhesitatingly consented.

But to the idea of Dolly's speedy visit to her people he seemed rather inclined to demur, though after a little consideration he was brought to admit that perhaps it might be advisable. And if she must go, the sooner she went the better, as he cared little for her association with her own kindred. Chrissie told him how much she had been charmed with Mrs. Derrington, and what a most suitable, or rather excellent, choice Mr. Derrington had made. And Jonathan replied:—"if she made such an impression on you, my dear, I am convinced that she is all—more than all—that her husband assures me she is. But however poor, weak, unpractical Derrington came to have such splendid luck I cannot guess! He has twice drawn prizes in the lottery of marriage, for his first wife was quite a superior woman, and he got on very well as long as she lived. I hope this second Mrs. D. will keep her well-meaning, but not too reliable husband, *well in hand*!"

Dolly was overjoyed when she understood the arrangements that had been concluded between her friends and relatives. From the satisfaction she evinced and expressed—far more volubly than was her wont—there seemed but very little danger of her being won over during her sojourn in Dorchester Street to decide in favour of returning to her old home. Annie was the only one to whom she obviously clung, though she admitted that the new "mother" was kinder and nicer than could have been expected, and

that she had turned the ugly, stupid little prison of a house into a very comfortable, snug abode.

Dolly and Annie had been instructed that they were to speak of the heads of the house as "father" and "mother." Maggie and Jennie adhered perversely to "pa" or "pap-pa," and, of course, addressed their stepmother as "Mrs. Derrington," and spoke of her to their friends as "the missis," and "that usurping tyrant."

CHAPTER XIII.

DOLLY'S MISGIVINGS.

SO Dolly paid her visit to her own kith and kin, and enjoyed herself immensely, but was quite ready to return to Clapham Common at the appointed period. During her visit she learned to love and esteem her step-mother, and, though she could not in her heart help contrasting the new home with the old, she said quite as little, and less, than could have been expected, even to her sister Annie.

On the day appointed she went back to "The Acacias," and was received with effusion by Queenie, who had passed a rather solitary week, her father having decreed that the old-established intimacy with Maggie should be steadily though mildly checked; and her friend, Louisa, having gone away to a Brighton boarding-school.

"But I don't care," said Queenie, as she bestowed another caress on Dolly. "Now I know I'm to have you always, and that you are to be my very own sister, I don't think I want anybody else. I shall never feel really dull as long as I have you, dear. We can play all our games together, and walk together, and do our lessons and practice together, and if things go wrong, as they will do sometimes, you know, we can get into disgrace together. But

tell me what you and Annie have been doing at Brixton, and if the house is at all altered ? ”

But Dolly had very little to say about the old home in Dorchester Street. She began to feel increasingly loyal towards that forsaken home, and she and Annie had decided between themselves that it was not wise and well to talk about quite private matters to people out of the family, and quite out of their own station. Annie was beginning to imbibe some of her step-mother's wisdom and fine feeling, and she had learnt among other things the propriety of a certain reticence on certain affairs which could not be the business of outsiders. She and Dolly had caught the spirit, though not the actual letter of the French proverb, which enjoins us all not to wash our dirty linen under the eyes of the exterior world.

So she only replied that nothing particular had transpired, that the house was as small and inconvenient as ever, and that Mrs. Derrington was looking out for a more roomy habitation, where they could move about with greater freedom and dispose of the furniture more comfortably. The neighbourhood, too, was getting worse and worse—“deteriorating,” Annie had said, quoting her step-mother; and the noise of the mannerless children, and the uproar from the corner public-house, were becoming insufferable. And “mother” had found a place with a nice old-fashioned garden—quite a big house, standing by itself—on the Hill! And it was “*to let*,” and she had made up her mind that it was not too high-rented, being let at a low rate in consequence of the lack of certain modern improvements.

“And did you see your married sister or her husband ? ” asked Queenie.

“No,” answered Dolly, quietly. And then she added, after a moment's reflection, “Mother does not quite approve of her conduct to father ; but she wishes us not to talk about it.”

“And Maggie and Jennie, how do they like the new order ? ”

“They like the idea of the new house very much ; they are tired of Dorchester Street. And there is a lawn, only

it is rather damp, where there is room enough to play *croquet*; and mother has promised them a set."

"Have you seen the new house?"

"Yes; it is called Vine Cottage, because there is a large vine almost covering it in front and on one side. But it is large for a cottage, and three stories high, and the rooms are most of them a good size; only there are beams in the ceilings and rather small-paned windows; but the house stands by itself, and the air, mother says, is beautifully pure, and there is plenty of sunshine."

And beyond external matters wise little Dolly would not go; and there were various questions she did not feel at all inclined to pursue; for, somehow, her eyes had been opened to many defects in the family *ménage*, of which she had been quite unconscious in the days gone by, and she did not want to listen to certain outspoken comments which she felt assured the relation of them would provoke from the extremely free-and-easy Queenie.

She had made one discovery which she kept entirely to herself, and did not even hint to kind Mrs. Osborne. She had found out, she scarcely knew how, that she had very little hold upon her father's affections, and that he was more than willing to part with her; something told her that she was the least loved of all the family, and that no one, except indeed Annie, wanted her at home. She was given to understand, though not perhaps unkindly, that she belonged no more to the circle in Dorchester Street; and as for Vine Cottage, it would never shelter her but as a temporary inmate—a mere passing visitor.

The morning after Dolly's return Miss Middlemore took her place as usual in the schoolroom, and lessons were resumed with a good deal of animation. Queenie, after her long holiday, was not at all indisposed to attend to them, and she began to devote herself earnestly to her musical studies. As the governess quickly perceived, the two girls were still essentially different in character—and each one was faithful to the *traits* which she had in the first instance observed. Queenie displayed more talent than ever; she learned with extreme rapidity; but her memory was not too retentive and her fancy was fickle; she practised one week

as if bent on making herself a brilliant *pianiste* ; the next she cared little for her regular music lesson, or ran over the keys so wildly that she incurred reproof ; and reproof, however mild, was just what the young lady could neither tolerate nor comprehend.

Another week found her constantly with pencil and indiarubber in hand, and she complained of the extreme slowness with which she was allowed to advance. Miss Middlemore was fond of "keeping her pupils back ;" she wished to try landscapes, especially such as presented the feature of feudal or ecclesiastical ruins. She had a passion for *ruins*, and her governess would keep her drawing "straight strokes," and making mere outlines that meant nothing at all, and were a "dreadful waste of time." She wanted to try every possible style ; she began a series of foliage-studies ; she tried a head or two ; she attempted something in chalks ; she resolved to depict *animals* ; and, last of all, she must have a box of the best water-colours, and give herself wholly to mountain scenery and water-pieces.

It all resulted in absurd confusion and ignominious failure ; the "ruins" were ruins indeed, for they tottered to their fall, and were generally left half unfinished ; the "heads" were those of the Gorgon species, if they were anything at all ! As for the "animals," it was necessary to write under the portrayal of the creature its exact name, for one of Queenie's dogs might well have been mistaken for a lion, and her cows were simply to be distinguished by their horns. She broke her chalks all to pieces, spoilt her colours, and at last gave up her drawing in disgust, and refused to take another lesson ; and one day, in a sort of frenzy, she threw into the schoolroom fire all her premature attempts, and made a solemn holocaust of Tintern Abbey and Windsor Castle, together with a sketch of a Highland lake, and the Burnham Beeches, and a rustic farmyard, and a head of Socrates, or some one else ; and fifty or sixty things besides, protesting that she gave up all idea of ever becoming an *artist* for ever and ever !

She had succeeded in nothing ; but she very nearly set the chimney on fire, and fled shrieking from the room when the burning soot began to fall into the fender.

And so term after term passed away, and, being really "clever," after a fashion, Queenie contrived to pick up something ; and she learned, in process of time, to write a legible ladylike hand, to read both French and English, and to make out a word of German occasionally. She was very great, too, at fancy work, and her undertakings were many in number and stupendous in design ; the execution was superior as far as it went ; but scarcely anything was ever finished, and it generally fell to Dolly's share to bring things to a late conclusion. She practised by fits and starts ; but having a very decided talent for music, she succeeded in playing better than most girls of her age ; and the applause she received whenever she chose to perform encouraged her to take still greater pains.

And so the years passed on, and Dolly slowly but steadily profited by her governess's instructions. She played, not at all brilliantly, but with great correctness and no little taste ; she wrote a good plain hand, rather square and formal in character, but singularly distinct ; she had a real genius for figures, and took quite naturally to mathematics ; by dint of plodding she learned to read and speak French very fairly ; she knew a good deal of Latin, and had mastered the German declensions, and many of the verbs, which—truth to tell—was all and rather more than Miss Middlemore herself professed. She could join in the hymns at church, for her ear was good and her time excellent, but her voice was nothing remarkable ; whereas Queenie sang like a skylark, or, as some people said, "like a nightingale !" and it was prophesied that she would rival Jenny Lind, and, later on, Christine Nilsson, or any other favourite and popular queen of song.

And all this while good Miss Middlemore had remained at her post, and had become so attached to the whole family that she could not bear to think of leaving them, though she sometimes reflected that she had taught Dolly almost as much as she was qualified to teach, and that Queenie would never learn from her anything more ; not though she went through the form of taking her accustomed seat for any number of years.

And Mr. Osborne had prospered exceedingly ; he had

grown marvellously rich, and people wondered greatly that he did not remove himself and his family to some more palatial residence than the comfortable and roomy but rather unpretentious abode on Clapham Common, which he had occupied so long. But he was not given to changes ; and he, and Chrissie, too, had grown attached to "The Acacias"—to the whole neighbourhood, which as yet was not in the least overbuilt ; and, above all, to the *Church*, of which they had been faithful members through so many years, and where their children, one after the other—except Queenie—had joined them, as they sat down to the table of the Lord. It was a great joy, a cause for deep thankfulness, that, as a family, they were unbroken in spiritual communion. Dolly had openly professed her faith in Christ at the age of fifteen.

It was a pain to the parents that Queenie still remained apart ; and there was a sense of something *missing* when, on Communion Sundays, she went home when the sermon was ended, or retired to the gallery as a spectator. Nevertheless, they hoped and hoped, for their daughter was as yet quite young, and she loved her pastor, and thought there was no service like their own—at once so simple, so beautiful, and so solemn. And she was so sweet and loving, and so reverential, and liked to listen to sermons that told of the better life, and of free salvation through Jesus Christ our Lord. Surely she would come *soon* ! And in patience Jonathan and Chrissie Osborne possessed their souls, and prayed—and *waited* ! How pleased they would be when she was proposed to the church ! What a church-meeting that would be which saw her a duly-received member ! What joy would be theirs when, on the following Sunday, they were *all* united in one blessed communion ! Surely she would halt between two opinions but a very little longer ; surely she would give herself to the Lord before many more peaceful Sabbaths had passed away !

Her views as regarded the denomination to which she belonged were all that could be desired. She was a decided *Nonconformist*, on conviction—not from mere habit, or because only her taste was gratified ; for she had not been

reared, as too many are, in ignorance of the *principles* of her religion, but she had been taught to examine the grounds on which she professed Nonconformity. Queenie *could* think, and she *could* reason, if she gave herself to the consideration of any serious question ; she had abundance of discrimination, and she gloried in the noble faith of her ancestors. She was, as we have said, a staunch believer in her own Church ; but that was not enough for her father and mother ; indeed, it was very far from enough for Chrissie, who yearned to see her darling a member of the one true and universal Church here below.

Meantime, however, Mr. Osborne had enlarged and much improved the mansion in which he had dwelt so long. "The Acacias" stood pleasantly in its own ground, though it was not as far removed as it might have been from the high road skirting the Common, which was beautiful exceedingly, only a very few years ago, before the rage for building about the pleasantest, breeziest suburbs of the metropolis set in. It is sweet enough now, in the early summer time, when the fine horse-chestnuts expand their leafy, tent-like shadow, and when the furze is golden, and the limes and acacias shed their fragrance on the evening air ; but it is no longer the lovely, peaceful haunt it used to be in olden days, sacred to the memory of Wilberforce and Venn—Elliot and Macaulay, and many another whose name is still unforgotten.

"The Acacias," as I said, stood in a very large garden, part of which has for the few last years been covered with mushroom houses, built in a sort of imitation "Queen Anne" style. But at the time of which I write it was just a "garden enclosed," and very fair and well cultivated. There were green, smooth-shaven lawns, clothed here and there with grand old trees. There was more than one venerable cedar sweeping the well-kept turf ; there were, of course, groups of fine flowering *acacias*, from which the place took its name a full century before ; there were stately elms, shining laurels, thickets of old arbutus and laurestinus. And on the high garden walls, and, indeed, all over the outside of the house, were beautiful, ivory-white blossoming magnolias, and luxuriant wistarias, to say nothing

of the trimmed ivy, the climbing roses, and the fragrant clematis and jasmine.

It was indeed a garden of delights ; and on one side of it was a small verdant level, that always looked as if by good rights it ought to have been enclosed within Mr. Osborne's own grounds. But it was not—there was some "Chancery muddle" about it, he used to tell people who asked him who it belonged to ; but one day the "muddle" somehow cleared itself up, and passed away, and Jonathan lost no time in making the few acres his very own. The next step was to enlarge the house, and, to a certain extent, "alter it altogether," as Queenie triumphantly expressed it. Indeed, it was principally to please her that the new wing was added, for Chrissie was perfectly content with her old pretty, pleasant drawing-room ; and Jonathan himself had hesitated for a little while, on the ground that he was almost too old to meddle with architects and builders, and amuse himself with bricks and mortar—"the place was quite good enough and commodious enough as it was, and it might serve his turn."

But in the end, *two* new wings were added ; one including a large, handsome suite of drawing-rooms and spacious bedrooms ; the other extending the servants' offices, while the housemaid's kitchen was thrown into the old library. The family went away to the seaside while the workmen were on the premises ; and when they came back the dear old place was so metamorphosed that its mistress could scarcely recognise it ; but Queenie exulted in the vast and wonderful improvement, and was really angry with Dolly, who, when questioned, replied that, on the whole, she liked things better as they had been.

Tenby had been their temporary home ; and, as nobody liked living in lodgings, a furnished house was hired for the whole twelvemonths, which led to Mr. Osborne making up his mind to purchase a villa which was for sale, so that his family might have a settled place of abode whenever it pleased them to spend a longer or shorter time on the coast. This was effected, he said, chiefly on account of his grandchildren, who were always wanting sea air ; for John had quickly followed James's example, and Oliver and Herbert

were not slow to quit the paternal roof and set up for themselves. Philip was the only one of the five sons who remained unmarried; and though he was still considered one of the family, he was not very often at "The Acacias."

Mrs. Fairfax's sons were all married likewise; but she kept her own little home, although she frequently paid short visits to her brother and sister; and although both Jonathan and Chrissie had earnestly begged her to give up house-keeping and make "The Acacias" her settled home.

Dolly often wished she would, for she was very fond of "Aunt Rachel," and no one in the house welcomed her so rapturously as she did when Mrs. Fairfax was now and then persuaded to spend a week or two at Clapham. For Dolores was sometimes rather lonely. Queenie had many friends now—some of whom her mother did not quite approve—and capricious as she had been from her infancy, she was very fond of fresh intimacies, and occasionally seemed quite taken up with new acquaintances, and almost forgetful of the existence of the adopted sister of her childhood. "Dolly was a dear girl, and as good as gold," she had said more than once; "and she should never love any one else half as well; but she was a little dull and monotonous, and not so much of a companion for herself as she might have been."

The girls were evidently drifting apart, though Queenie would not own it even to herself; but Dolores, while she tried to persuade herself that it was only her own unhappy disposition that caused her to feel at all neglected, did sometimes sigh over the bygone hours when she had been all the world to Queenie. And Dolly was a true-hearted girl; she had no parentheses, as too many people have, alas! in her friendship; she could not love and unlove at pleasure—how often she wished she could!—for steadfastness and devoted affection were natural attributes of her character. She must be true to her loves; she simply *could not* be inconstant.

One day when Mrs. Fairfax was staying at "The Acacias" she found Dolly sitting all alone in the shade of the great cedar, and obviously doing nothing, though a volume lay half-opened upon the grass. "Dolly," she asked, "where

is Queenie? I have been looking for her, and cannot find her any where. And why are you sitting with nothing on your head—qualifying for the faceache, again?”

“Queenie has driven to South Kensington with the Misses Harcourt and Mademoiselle, Aunt Rachel. Adelaide sent for her, and she left the house quite suddenly. I have no idea when she will be back.”

“I thought you and she were going to the Crystal Palace this afternoon—going to see *Lurline*?”

“We were; but I suppose she forgot. Queenie does not always remember, you know, Aunt Rachel.”

“No, indeed; she only remembers when quite convenient to herself,” replied Mrs. Fairfax. “But why did you not remind her of the engagement?”

“I did not care to do so—I never like to interfere with her pleasures; and,” added Dolly, “she has so many sources of enjoyment apart from me now.”

“I know she has, child; and the less you worry about Queenie the better for yourself. She is variable as the breeze; she can't help it, I verily believe! She loves change; if one foot is on sea the other is on shore; she is to one thing constant never! Inconstancy is a part of her very nature.”

“Not real inconstancy, Aunt Rachel. Queenie never means to be unkind.”

“Very few people deliberately *mean* unkindness, my dear; but, nevertheless, a great deal of pain can be caused without actual intention. I sometimes think I had rather have to do with those who do evil through *malice prepense*, for then one can guard against them. One is often so much the worse for those who *mean no harm*—but only *do* it! And too often when it is done it cannot be undone.”

“No, indeed,” said Dolly, in a low tone, as they walked towards one of the greenhouses; and Mrs. Fairfax wondered whether Queenie had been more unkind than usual, for Dolly was not a girl given to fancies, and she was much less morbid than girls of her age generally are. She reflected awhile in silence, and then decided not to pursue the subject. Mrs. Fairfax was a very wise woman, and she knew that some slight wounds heal all the quicker for never

being looked at ; some wrongs, real or fancied, are better never noticed, never spoken of. She changed the subject, and asked Dolores how long it was since she had seen her step-mother.

"Not more than a week," was the reply ; "she came here to fetch Annie home." For Annie had been spending a few days with her sister, and it was one of the little things which caused Dolores a good deal of secret pain that Queenie had taken a strong dislike to Annie—no one exactly knew *why* ! But, then, Regina Osborne was not a reasonable creature—the spoiled favourites of fortune very seldom are—and no one ever tried to account for her passing likes and dislikes, which occasionally, though not very often, took the more serious character of loves and hates. Annie, too, had gone with the Osbornes to Tenby, for Chrissie had taken care that the sisters should always spend a few weeks of every year in unbroken companionship. Annie had grown up into a very sweet, bright-tempered, lovable girl, refined in tone and manner, and rather pretty. She never forgot that she was, as it were, Dolly's guest, on sufferance ; she always treated all members of the Osborne family as superiors, and deferred especially to Queenie ; and yet Queenie could not bring herself to regard her with any sort of favour—it was all she should do, she confided to Florence L'Estrange, one of her new friends, to be "commonly polite."

"It is quite settled that Annie shall take that situation Miss Middlemore heard of?" asked Mrs. Fairfax.

"Almost. She must finish the quarter where she is, you know ; she has been helping with the junior classes at Miss Williams's ever since the spring, and receiving lessons from two masters in return for her services. I think she is now quite qualified to teach Mrs. Lee's little girls."

"I think so, too. Mrs. Derrington has taken great pains with Annie."

She has taught her nearly all she knows, and Annie has worked most steadily. She has got on very well, I believe, since Maggie and Jennie married."

"Ah ! how do they prosper, all those married sisters of yours?"

"Maggie and Jennie both seem to be pretty comfortable, though mother still wishes that Jennie had waited two or three years. Her husband is such a mere boy, and he has next to no settled income; they are full of hope, however, and expecting all sorts of good fortune to befall them."

"I hope they may not be disappointed! And what is this I hear about Mr. and Mrs. Fred Chapman?"

Dolly coloured vividly, and Mrs. Fairfax said, hastily, "Don't tell me, if you don't like, child; we've most of us got a cupboard with a skeleton in it, that we prefer to keep shut up from general inspection."

"From general inspection—yes!" returned Dolly, after a second's hesitation; "but I really think I cannot have secrets from you, Aunt Rachel. It is always a comfort to tell you one's little misgivings and anxieties."

"Then tell away, Dolly; you know I am no chatterbox, and shall respect your secret."

"Oh, it is no secret! I have as much contempt for people who make mysteries out of nothing, as I have for regular gossips. But mother—Derrington, of course, I don't mean mother Osborne—is very much exercised in her mind about the Chapmans. They are living in so much style. Father says they are cutting quite a dash out at Forest Hill, where they have taken a really handsome house, and keep up an establishment with—I dare not say how many servants."

"Do they not give out that a relative, or relatives, in Australia, have left them quite a nice little fortune?"

"Yes; that is the tale both Mr. Chapman and Kitty tell—only, unfortunately, they did not compare notes before they told it to their friends; and Kitty is, and always has been, famous for a bad memory. Fred told father that his Uncle Tom had died in Australia, and left him sole heir to all his property—which is considerable. And father, who is rather easily imposed upon, took it all in, and congratulated him. Then Kitty called on mother—she has taken to be quite intimate at Vine Cottage of late!—to inform her of their wonderful '*luck*;' and *her* story was that Aunt Somebody had departed this life in New Zealand—or Tasmania—she was not clear which—and left all her money to her

dear nephew, Frederick. While, a few days afterwards, she met Jennie, and informed her that their newly-acquired wealth came from a *cousin*, whom they had never seen, they being his 'next of kin' alive."

"Dear me! But that is perplexing, They have actual means of some sort, though, I suppose, unless they are imposing on people—pretending to have 'great expectations,' and living entirely on credit?"

"They have a good deal of ready money, certainly, mother knows, and she told Annie and me that she could not help being a little uneasy, 'because—somehow—she cannot help doubting this story of the Australian inheritance; and Fred has no situation, no 'visible means of subsistence,' she says."

"A little bird, who knows something of the Chapmans, has whispered to me that Fred, and Nellie's husband, Mr. Hancox—both *gamble*! My son Charlie, who is in a stock-broker's office—and hears a good bit of gossip from day to day—says if he does not take care he will come to grief before he is a twelvemonth older. He is said to be one of a betting company, who are most of them blacklegs, and shunned by all respectable folk. Bless me, Dolly dear, I quite forgot for the moment that this Hancox was your sister's husband. Don't look so distressed."

"I am distressed, Aunt Rachel, whenever I think about Kitty and Nellie; and I am afraid they will have to pay bitterly for their foolish conduct. I feel sometimes as if they would live, both of them, to be a disgrace to the family, through their husbands. Yes; I overheard Queenie telling somebody, that her brother had told her that my sister Nellie had married 'one of the most notorious scoundrels in the country.' And I am afraid it is too true."

"I am afraid it is, Dolly. Never mind; if people *will* go to the bad, they must; you can only pray for them, and that is no little comfort. They cannot very well compromise you in any way; you must steer clear of them, for you can do them no actual good by any kind of intercourse. Recollect, you cannot walk in dirty places and keep your own clothes spotless."

"I know. I am not afraid for myself ; I am quite safe *here*. But I sometimes tremble for mother and father—I can scarcely tell *why* ! And Annie, too, it is so bad for her to have relations whom she must not acknowledge. However, mother is as wise as she is good, and will take care poor father gets himself into no *mess*, for I do not mind admitting to you, Aunt Rachel, that he wants *taking care of*. He would have burnt his fingers more than once, to my certain knowledge, but for his wife. I often wonder how he contrives to keep his situation at the office year after year."

"He would not, if he were anybody else ; my brother always remembers that he is your father, and he knows the worst of him ; he is not too wise, but he is faithful ; he will do no harm, if he know it. And, then, your step-mother is a host in herself ; things will never get quite out of the square while she is to the fore, I am well persuaded. She will keep shame from her hearth as well as poverty. Do not look so sad, Dolly ; you can do nothing in the matter of the Chapmans and the Hancoxes. Trust in God, and be of good courage."

"I wish you were not going home to-morrow, Aunt Rachel ; you are always such a comfort to me ; for I do not like to trouble mother Osborne, and I shrink from unveiling family matters to Miss Middlemore. I wish you would make up your mind to live here always, as they wish you to do."

"I can't, Dolly ; I must keep my own little home. I love and esteem my brother above all other men ; but I cannot live constantly in his house ; I can only be his guest at intervals. I have my reasons."



CHAPTER XIV.

"STAR SAPPHIRES."

THE summer faded, the evenings began to close in ; it was dark now when people went to dress for dinner, and the usual entertainments which winter heralds were already being discussed. Dolly and Queenie were both supposed to be emancipated from the schoolroom, only Miss Middlemore, who had been constituted "resident governess" for the last few years, lingered on, no one exactly knew in what capacity. Dolly still read with her, and took German lessons from a professor ; but Queenie spurned the idea of being a pupil on any terms, except, indeed, to a singing-master who was exceedingly popular just then in the fashionable world. He could command any terms, and that, of course, caused him to be so much in request that it was by no means easy to make an engagement with him. Queenie, with her usual good fortune, had only to request his services and at once secure them.

"Dolly," said Queenie, coming into the room one day when her friend was busy over a volume of *Lamartine*, "put by that stupid book ; I want to talk to you."

"Yes," returned Dolly, meekly closing the volume ; "what is it ?"

Queenie, it must be remarked, was just then in one of her most gracious moods ; she was completely satisfied, for the hour, with herself, and consequently with all the world ; and every now and then a fit of compunction seized her, on account of the neglect with which she was quite conscious of having treated her old companion.

"I have been talking to father, and I have got him to *promise*—and you know he never goes from his word—that we shall have a grand party this Christmas, in consequence of you and me having attained the mature and presentable age of seventeen. I need not say that I shall take care to

turn it into a regular—*ball*! It is quite time we both 'came out,' Dolly."

"It is time that *you* did, I know," returned Dolly, looking up admiringly into the lovely, radiant face. "But there is no reason why I should keep you company. I can do very well—indeed, shall be most in my proper station without special gaieties; though I shall enjoy a dancing-party, I know. I do love a good dance!"

"I know you do! Who does not? So begin to get ready at once. I declare you are practising your steps already."

"When is the dance to be?"

"Call it a *ball*! If you persist in calling the party by its right name it will turn out a 'ball'; it is half the battle to call things really what they are."

"And when will the ball be?"

"It is meant to honour our mutual birthday; but I do not see how it is possible to give a proper ball on Christmas-day. Half the people one wants will be engaged at family parties; and then there are the goody-goody folk, who go to church and make a sort of Sunday of the 25th of December. It would never do."

"No; it would not for a great many reasons. It may be in the Christmas week, though?"

"That is what I thought; but we must talk it over, and make up our minds. You and I will have enough to do in one way or another. The first thing is to draw up a list and think of our dresses. What shall we wear?"

"Mother shall decide for me; she always knows what suits me. I should like to see you in pale blue—you never look so well as in blue."

"I know I don't; but father all but insists on my wearing my *sapphires*, and so I think, to set them off, I ought to be in *white* of some sort. If I wear blue, I must tease father to give me some pearls. Adelaide Harcourt has a set worth I do not know how much; I should like pearls immensely—I *should* like diamonds, for I have a passion for priceless gems, only unmarried girls cannot possibly sport them, you know. But won't I go in for diamonds the moment I become a matron!"

"If you can afford them. But you may spend an enormous fortune in diamonds. I have been reading a book on *Precious Stones* quite lately, and so I know of what I am speaking. I have heard of a collection valued at a million of money!"

"You are talking of Crown jewels. Of course, I am not thinking of emulating empresses, and I do not expect ever to possess the Kohinoor. I should not even care for *the* Moonstone; I shall be quite contented with the most costly *parure* that London can produce. But never mind that sort of thing just now; I can leave my *brilliants* to the brilliant future. The question now is as to pearls, which I *may* wear, and which I feel pretty sure I could coax father into giving me for my birthday present. Or, shall I stick to the sapphires?"

"They must be re-set, must they not, before you can properly display them?"

"They are re-set; did not you know? Ah, I remember now—Adelaide and Florence were with me when we went to choose patterns at the jeweller's. But father brought them home last night, and the new setting makes them seem twice the beauties they were before. Come to my room and look at them; I had no idea they were half so lovely!"

Dolly willingly obeyed; she had quite a passion for beautiful things, though she never dreamed of possessing them herself. She was surprised to find how wonderfully Queenie's sapphires were improved by their sojourn in Bond Street; she had no idea they were so splendid.

"They must be extremely valuable," she said, as she took up one of the exquisitely-fashioned bracelets from its snowy nest. "I should say these are *Oriental* sapphires."

"To be sure they are. They are 'star sapphires,' Mr. S—— tells us, and they are worth an enormous sum of money. I had no idea of their value, though I believe father knew pretty well what they really were, for he never let me have them in my own possession; and they were always sent to the Bank whenever we were from home, together with the plate and mother's lovely diamond brooch."

"Is it wise to have them here now, Queenie?"

"Quite wise, you little prudent puss. This case has a lock of a thousand; it can't be picked. Did you ever see such a darling of a key? I can wear it at my watch-chain if I like; I can make a sort of 'charm' of it if I choose, for the filagree-work is lovely, downright lovely."

"But the jewel-case itself might be stolen?"

"I suppose it might, for it is not large, nor too heavy, and I can lift it myself; but father has made me promise to keep it always in that secret drawer in the cabinet, which cannot be moved from the room, and the drawer is, as you know, in the little recess that is safe under Bramah lock and key. Oh, trust me for taking good care of my own treasures!"

"Only take all care, Queenie. You *are* forgetful, you know. Remember the five-pound note at Tenby."

"Ah, that was only five pounds; these are worth thousands! I am careless of my money, I know—I always was; but this is another thing. And at Tenby we had people about us on whom we could not rely. Here, at home, it is quite a different affair. All our old trusted servants are incorruptible. And only those know anything about my sapphires. Only *three* of them are at all aware of their existence, and no one but Nurse, who might be trusted with countless millions, is in the secret of their whereabouts—except, of course, ourselves."

"And she will never open her lips on the subject. Old Nurse is almost absurdly cautious."

"So she is! And in some little ways she is really rather provoking, Dolly; she is a dear, blessed old thing, and I should be lost without her, and so would mother. But I am quite resolved that I will have a proper maid, who knows *how* to dress one!"

"Oh, Queenie, do you really mean it?"

"Of course I do. Father is rich enough to afford me any number of maids. My sister-in-law, Alice—Herbert's wife, you know—has a French lady's maid, and never stirs without her."

"But Alice is a married woman, and she has been brought up to be so very helpless."

"Do not be silly, Dolly ; if Alice is helpless I am idle, and it all comes to the same thing. And young ladies of *condition* always have their own maid. Adelaide and Florence and Eleanor Effingham have each one ; and see how perfectly they are dressed. At seventeen I shall consider myself fully 'out,' and entitled to regulate my own affairs."

"I think you have always regulated them pretty much as you please, Queenie, dear. I wonder how it would be with you if you could *not* do as you liked—if you had to bow to the will of others ? "

"I should *die* ! But I never would yield to any creature in the world—except, of course, father and mother ; it is my duty to yield to them. The man I marry must give me everything I want, and refuse me nothing, and do exactly as I please."

"Poor man ! Must he never please himself ? "

"If he love me—and I will be satisfied that he do before I am married to him—he will please himself in pleasing me ; he will have no will but mine. I must have a devoted love, or I will have none at all."

Dolly laughed. "I am afraid you will never find a lover who fulfils all your conditions ; the man may think he has claims as well as yourself, and he *may* think he has a right to be obeyed ! Husbands are under that impression ; even your father, who is about the best husband in the world, I should think, expects obedience."

"Ah ! But mother has no will of her own—I often say so. *I* have a will, and I have always had it ; and I mean to have my own way as a married woman as I have had it all my life. I shall be *Felicia Regina*."

"I could almost find it in my heart to wish that you may never be married, Queenie ; for with your present views you are not very likely to be happy, or to ensure another's happiness."

"I suppose you think I am *selfish*. Aunt Rachel read me quite a lecture, the other day, on my 'ingrain selfishness'—you are neither of you too complimentary. There ! Don't let us begin to philosophise and moralise ; I do hate serious conversation. My great objection to you, Dolly,

is that you talk like a sage in petticoats ; you might be preparing to celebrate your thirty-seventh instead of your seventeenth birthday. Let us consider about our dresses."

"I shall wear just what the mother chooses for me ; you had better consult some one who understands *toilettes* far better than I do."

"It will scarcely do to be dressed exactly alike, I suppose ?"

"That it will not. The mother has never tried that since James and Emily were married, nine years ago, when we figured together in pale pink and white. What a little fright I looked, to be sure ! How Nursie did worry herself about my miserable 'rats' tails' that my curls would turn into ! And how the delicate tints told upon my unlovely complexion ! How well I remember it ! I *felt* ugly all day ; and once I heard somebody criticising my 'unfortunate appearance.' I was so conscious of being altogether out of place in such a brilliant circle that I wonder I did not run away."

"Oh, you are dark, and I am fair, which makes all the difference ! We have never been dressed quite alike, except, perhaps, in brown holland at the seaside, since that memorable day, when I was as much admired as you, poor dear ! were criticised."

And as Queenie spoke, Dolly thought how very great was "the difference,"—a difference which no canons of Art, as applied to *costume*, could by any possibility obviate. Queenie had grown up the loveliest girl that your imagination could picture. Her mother was sweet and fair, and had been even *pretty*, in a certain degree ; her father, as a young man, had been noted for his "good looks ;" but nobody ever accredited him with being an Apollo or an Adonis. It was quite a puzzle from whom Felicia Regina inherited her unquestionable beauty and her all-conquering loveliness—for lovely and beautiful she absolutely was ; so much so, that people not too well-mannered would stop short and turn round to look at her as she passed by them in the streets. At length Mrs. Fairfax one day, turning over a heap of long-forgotten old treasures, which were in some sort regarded as heirlooms, came upon a small oval minia-

ture in a morocco case, very delicately painted and stippled on ivory; and when it was exhibited the family then and there at once decided that Queenie owed her extraordinary charms to her great-great grandmother—her father's ancestress on the maternal side.

There was the same exquisite complexion of transparent fairness, the ruby lips, and the cheeks just tinged with a delicate wild rose bloom; the perfect features, the dark violet-blue eyes, with the pencilled, well-defined eyebrows, and the long dark lashes resting on the rounded, dimpled cheek; and the golden-brown hair, or, rather, pure chestnut, that the most spiteful enemy could not have dared to stigmatise as "*red*"! though some people did call it a *Titian* "something," which might be either red, or gold, or brown—a colour utterly indescribable, but beautiful as rare.

And her figure was as unequalled as her face; she was neither tall nor short, but of the *juste milieu* that seems one of the perfections of a truly beautiful woman. She had small, well-formed feet, and her hands were exquisite; her neck was round and slender—a firm little pillar, set upon snowy, drooping shoulders. In person, she was as nearly without defect as a mortal maiden could be; and, from her seventeenth year, it seemed to all who knew her that she grew only fairer and lovelier as the days went by.

And Dolores—was she still the Dolores of old? No; she was greatly improved in personal appearance, though she could not possibly take rank as a beauty, or even expect to be much admired. The most that could be said for her was that she was no longer decidedly plain. Her complexion had mended—the extreme sallowness had disappeared. There were no dark circles under the eyes, and the hues of health were at last upon her cheeks. The eyes themselves were beautiful, lustrous, and dark as night; they were not absolutely *black*, as most people considered them to be—and as, indeed, very few eyes really are—but they were of the very deepest grey, and the lashes were long, "just like fringes of ebony!" as Nurse was foolish enough to say; for Nurse, though devoted to her nursling of other days, had long ago become passionately fond of Dolly, and

thought her *almost* as handsome, in her own peculiar style, as any Andalusian maiden of romance ; and nearly always spoke of her as "Miss Dolores."

There was no doubt about Dolly's hair—that was long and silken, and of the hue of the raven's wing. It would never curl ; but it could be disposed of in heavy braids and massive plaits, that formed a coronet which even Queenie could have found it in her heart to envy, as she did, sometimes, the superior stature of her friend. She would have liked to be, as she often said, "a daughter of the gods, divinely tall" as well as "divinely fair." She forgot that with her unusual height Dolly was still very thin—some people unkindly said very *lean* and *bony* ! But in days to come she might be plump enough, Nurse assured her mistress, who really wished to see her adopted daughter just a little more *embonpoint*, and doing a little better credit to the good housekeeping of "The Acacias."

"One thing is quite certain," said Nurse one day to Miss Middlemore ; "our young ladies can never in any way be *rivals* ! The same people will never admire them, the same gentleman will never fall in love with both ; nor do I think that what one fancies the other will very much care about. And it is quite as well that it should be so—quite as well ; for unlikely things do sometimes happen in the best regulated families, even when girls are sisters of the same blood."

For many reasons Chrissie Osborne had long ago decided that the children should be dressed quite differently. Dolly would be comfortably provided for—that, of course, had been a settled matter from the very first ; and she would not go poorly dowered to her husband, if she should secure one of whom Mr. and Mrs. Osborne did not distinctly disapprove. But Queenie would have a large fortune—how large people could not guess ; but it was well known that her father was immensely rich, and that quite apart from his business in Laurence Pountney Lane ; James and John were really masters there now, though Mr. Osborne still wielded a certain power, and kept in his own hands what the younger men frequently called "the casting vote." Had it not been so, Mr. Derrington, in all probability,

would have been cashiered, or, perhaps, pensioned off—as, indeed, might very well be the case, for his wife's little fortune had increased, though not very much, since her second marriage, and her thrift had made the very best of his salary. Moreover, he had but one daughter now actually on his hands, and she had long resolved to be dependent only on herself.

Mr. Osborne was quite content, however, to leave most things to his sons; they were excellent men of business, and ready for any responsibility. He spent now three days of every week at home, and was always ready to accompany his wife and the girls to the seaside, and was even content to remain quite away from business for a few weeks at a time, whenever occasion required. For though a stout and healthy man of his age, he had worked hard in his time, and, in the natural course of events, was “not quite as young as he had been.” Besides, there was not the least fear of anything going wrong or the prosperity of the firm declining with James and John—both steady, married men—at the head of affairs; and himself always ready to throw in the weight of his counsel whenever it was needed.

Still, the rumours of his exceeding wealth were now and then exaggerated, and Queenie was often quoted as such an heiress that those who did not know much about her five brothers might well be pardoned for forgetting that she was not an only child.

But all this, of course, is parenthetical, and perhaps a very little in advance of the discussion which the two girls were holding about the ball that Queenie had quite decided should be celebrated in honour of their seventeenth birthday.

“I *must* wear the sapphires,” continued Queenie, *à propos* of the question of white and blue. “I should love the blue, for, as you say, and as other people say, nothing suits me half so well; but father insists on Aunt Jemima's present being duly honoured on this my first appearance as a grown-up young lady, and I am obliged to own that white will go best with *them*. He will give me the pearls, I am sure, if I only coax him a little bit; but, after all, there is nothing for it but to wear the sapphires. Yes; I think I

had better make up my mind to it—they are lovely, and nobody else will sport such fine jewels, unless, indeed, Adelaide Harcourt gets her mother to lend her those all but priceless pearls. And, I suppose, Aunt Jemima ought to be honoured, considering she *is* 'Aunt Jemima.'"

"She will want to know if you wear them at the ball, I suppose?"

"Of course she will—trust the old lady for that. She did say once that she had serious thoughts of making her will in my favour; it would be scarcely worth while to displease her, with such a probability in prospect. I should like to be an heiress in my own right. She will have to be invited for the party, certainly."

"But she cannot come—can she?"

"I don't know. She hasn't been out of the house since the year that I was born—not out of her room, for I don't know how long! She is partly paralysed, people say."

"Then she can hardly be present at a ball."

"One would think not; but she is like nobody else in the world. She does things that her medical attendant forbids her to do—things that she is warned may be her *death*, if she really attempt doing them. It is upon the cards that we may have to receive her in the ball-room on the appointed evening."

"But how? Mother said she could not walk."

"Neither can she; but she can be lifted into that wonderful mechanical chair of hers, that goes almost of itself. She has a maid who understands all about it—and all about her, too—whose sole duty is to push her about. The chair can be carried upstairs and down at pleasure, and it is moved with so much ease that a child can do it, and she is not in the least shaken or fatigued. There is nothing to forbid her making her appearance at any time, if she so will it. I shall not be in the least surprised to see her gliding into the room—nothing would astonish me short of beholding her perform one of the *minuets* of which she is so fond of talking, or leading off at the top of her favourite '*contre danse*.'"

"Do you know, Queenie, I am not at all sure what relation Aunt Jemima is to you?"

"No relation at all, except in the remotest degree; she was a sort of cousin of mother's mother! She may be my tenth or twentieth cousin—I really do not know. If she were not so rich, I certainly should not trouble myself to account for the consanguinity."

"But she must be fond of you?"

"I suppose she is, in her way. She has neither chick nor child—nobody who has the remotest claim upon her, except the great Angora cat, that may not survive her, for she declares that she has had it more than twenty years. And she must leave her money to somebody; she will scarcely want it buried with her. Farther than that, I believe, she has a strong regard for mother; and I am mother's only daughter; I owe a lot to the destiny that ruled over my birth. If I had been born *not* a woman-child, but a sixth son, nobody would have made any fuss about me; Aunt Jemima would never have given me her sapphires—nor entertained an idea of naming me as her heiress. I am very, very glad that I am not Philip's younger brother, but the sole *daughter* of the house—*Felicia Regina Osborne!*"



CHAPTER XV.

DRAWING THE LINE.

YES, Mr. Osborne had really promised his daughter that "an entertainment" should be given in honour of the mutual birthday which was now impending, and, of course, there was to be *dancing*; only when he pledged himself to the festival, not a word had been said as to the "ball," upon which Queenie had set her heart. He had a settled objection to this kind of entertainment, and he was quite resolved never to give it; nevertheless, he liked to see young people enjoy themselves, and he was by no

means averse to a thoroughly good dance. Still, he looked just a little confounded when Queenie began to expatiate upon the necessary preparations; and when she showed him the list she had thoughtfully prepared, he at once objected, remarking that neither "mother" nor himself had ever contemplated making so great a fuss about the affair. The generous-hearted owner of "The Acacias" began to calculate whether it would be within the bounds of possibility to accommodate so many guests.

"See here, my dear Queenie," said he, "we can never do it; we shall overflow to repletion, and everybody will be disappointed. We shall not have a nice little *hop*, as we contemplated, but a sort of *rout*!"

"Very well," acquiesced Queenie, calmly; "the more the better. I hate to see rooms half full."

"What do you call half full?" inquired her father; "we shall be most disagreeably crowded. Besides, we can never do it; we shall only make ourselves ridiculous—giving parties to such an extent is not what you would call our *métier*."

"Why not?" asked Queenie, still unconcernedly; "we must make it our *métier*, then. It is quite time we began to study the duties of our position; you are rich enough to give half-a-dozen *balls*."

"Whether I am rich enough or not is scarcely the question, my dear," returned Mr. Osborne, still in the same obstinate tone; "I am not going to give *one* ball, leave alone half-a-dozen. I promised you a nice little dance on your birthday, Pussie, and a nice little dance you shall have; you will be wanting the carpets up next?"

"The carpets up?" echoed Queenie, with innocent surprise; "why you dear, unsophisticated old dad, who ever heard of a dance with the carpets down? we should be smothered with dust. Of course, they must be taken up! I only wish we had proper *parquet* floors. Trust me, father, I can manage it; but you must give me *carte blanche*."

"That requires consideration, my dear," gravely rejoined Mr. Osborne. "But tell me what you really do want; I will try to meet your wishes as far as I can."

"That is a dear old daddy, now!" cried Queenie, coaxingly throwing her pretty white arms round the broad paternal shoulders; "never you trouble yourself about the party; let Dolly and me manage it all, we will promise not to ruin you, *quite*! I am sure mother agrees; don't you, dear mammy?"

"I agree, conditionally," replied Mrs. Osborne; "but *I must* know what you girls have planned. First show me your list."

Queenie, with admirable docility, handed it over; and Mrs. Osborne proceeded to examine the names and the number of the intended guests. She shook her head when she had finished; "Quite too many, my dear. I do not wonder your father hesitated; you know I cannot bear crowded rooms."

"Suppose we go through the list together, mother dear, and see for ourselves who ought to be invited, and who must be excluded. Of course, I begin with my own brothers. I expect Philip to distinguish himself; and then my married brothers, and their wives, and some of their most intimate friends; then Aunt Rachel and Cousin Tom and Walter, and *their* wives; why we are quite a tribe of ourselves; it would never do to leave out a single relation, or near connection—now, would it?"

"I suppose not; but all the Riverses, and the Landors, and the Gregsons count up wonderfully, to say nothing of Alice's one sister, and her pretty cousin Marion, who cannot very well be left out. Osbornes and Fairfaxes, and their next of kin, make a clan of themselves."

"No; I do not see how one of *these* can be excluded from your list."

"Certainly not. Let me see: our own people, counting in the Riverses, and the Landors, &c., &c., and *ourselves*, and the Wilsons, whom Philip will be sure to insist on, don't make more than thirty, certainly not more than forty! And then, of course, come my own especial friends, and they *must* have partners. Mother, we cannot say less than two hundred; I shall fret myself to death if I am to be thwarted on my birthday, and so I am sure will Dolly."

"I think Dolly might be very easily satisfied; she will be

perfectly content if she is sure of plenty of partners. Dolly dances as naturally as the waves dance on a sunshiny morning. And then there is her sister Annie; you have not put down Annie Derrington's name."

"No; I have not," replied Queenie, with decision; "I never meant to put it down."

"But why? Dolly ought, at least, to have one of her sisters on her birthday; and Annie is the only one we should care to invite. She will be very much hurt, Queenie, if Annie is left out."

"Oh, she will never think of it, if the idea is not absolutely presented to her. And, mother, I may as well say, while we are alone, that I *will not* have Annie Derrington to my birthday party; I do not like her—she is not the sort of girl I care for."

"But, my dear, ought you not to sacrifice your private tastes and distastes on such an occasion, and where our dear Dolly is so closely concerned? Why do you dislike poor Annie—what has she done?"

"She has done nothing, and left nothing undone, that I know of. She is very good, I am sure, rather too good, in fact; but I simply do not like her—it is just a case of 'I do not like you, Dr. Fell;' the reason *why* I dare say I shall never know. She is not my style—not at all my fancy, if it comes to that. And, mother, when it was settled, nine years ago, that Dolly was to live with us, and be one of the family, I am quite sure that you never thought of being intimate with the Derringtons."

Dolly being happily out of the way just then, Mrs. Osborne proceeded to argue the question at some length; but her wayward daughter absolutely refused to listen to reason. She never could account for her likes or dislikes, as her mother very well knew: there were people whom she "took to," at the very first glance; there were others from whom her "very soul recoiled!" Queenie was rather fond of using powerful language; and when she once felt repelled she could never bring herself to be on terms of intimacy with the objectionable person. It was of no use whatever to dispute the point; there it was. She wished Annie Derrington no harm, she would even do her a good

turn, if occasion presented ; but she did not wish to cultivate her friendship.

Queenie had one or two more questions to settle with her mother and father, and by dint of a little tact, and a great deal of obstinacy and self-will, she succeeded in settling them all according to her own pleasure. The list of invitations, instead of being cut down, was expanded ; cards were issued for *three hundred* ! Mr. Osborne threatened to go to bed, or to "put up" at the *Grosvenor Hotel*, on the night of the birthday party ; and it was very speedily determined that the carpets of both drawing-rooms, and that of a smaller room, that could be converted into a *boudoir, en suite*, should be, and *must be*, taken up. Then there was the large conservatory, which could be lighted with pale rose-coloured lamps ; and the staircase and broad landings, which could be so easily utilised ; for the whole house was heated by an apparatus that was never known to get out of order.

Very early, in the course of events, Queenie's two bosom friends, Adelaide Harcourt and Florence L'Estrange, had been called to consultation, and one day, when they were all three holding cabinet council in Queenie's own room, the trio conceived the most brilliant and audacious idea. Nobody ever knew exactly with whom the thought originated. Florence said the scheme was entirely her own. Adelaide declared that it had occurred to her on the very same evening that darling Queenie confided to her the clever arrangements that were to convert a "little dance"—an informal sort of common birthday celebration—into a "*Grand Ball* !" The plan was nothing more nor less than to erect a spacious ornamental *tent*—water-proof and weather-proof, of course—immediately behind the conservatory, and to make *that* the principal ball-room. There could be dancing in the drawing-room, of course ; but the little *boudoir* would do so nicely for a card-room ; for there *must* be cards for the elderly people, "for those, you know, who would not care to dance, even a quadrille," was the *dictum* of Miss Florence L'Estrange.

When Jonathan Osborne heard of this new arrangement he hesitated for awhile, but was won over to the "tent"

scheme. It could easily be done for less than a hundred pounds, he was assured; and, as everybody knew, a hundred pounds more or less was "nothing at all" to the wealthy master of "The Acacias." But when it came to the question of a regular *card-room* he did more than hesitate; he stoutly protested that he never had, and never would, permit the introduction of a pack of playing-cards into the house that owned him as the head. He had always, from his boyhood upwards, hated gambling and games of *chance*. He had never played such a game, nor had any of his sons, to the best of his knowledge, and he would not begin now. The girls might have their *ball*, since they were bent upon it—and for once in a way; for there *could* be nothing wrong in dancing and music, though he was sadly afraid a Christian had no business to spend so much money on mere worldly amusements, when the Lord's *poor* were, so many of them, wanting bread. Nevertheless, he must draw a line somewhere, and he drew it at *cards*, very much to the disgust of some of his daughter's favoured friends.

As for his daughter herself, she cared very little, if at all, for the prohibition. So that she might dance all night, enact the Queen of the Ball, and appear beautifully dressed, she would feel perfectly content. What were cards to her? She had sat by a whist table, at Lady Harcourt's, and she had decided that it was extremely stupid, and only fit for old fogies and prosy *passées* dowagers; and she had only made out that "spades is trumps." And she had taken a hand at cribbage upon one occasion, when spending the evening at the L'Estranges, but had lost patience before the end of the game, and mistook her knaves for kings, and was never quite certain whether she held clubs or spades. She was inclined to pout a little at first when her father issued his veto; but as no pleasure of her own would be hindered, she acquiesced without much persuasion, and was only too thankful that she might have her own way in the more important details of the evening. She had *carte blanche* as to the tent ball-room. She was to have the conservatory lighted up and disposed according to her own critical taste; the *band* was exactly what she wanted, and

the supper, to be "served" by *Gunter* himself, was sure to be *splendid*. Though, to do Queenie justice, she cared as little for the supper as for the prohibited card-tables; so that she had an ice or a patty when she really wished for it, so that her partners were according to her taste, and played the *courtier* as she approved, she would be perfectly satisfied.

The ball was finally fixed for Twelfth Night; the invitation cards were issued; neither Chrissie nor her husband knew exactly how many went out in their name. Dolly was not in the secret, though she was supposed to take an equal share in all the arrangements; and Queenie kept her own counsel. She had her desire, too, as regarded the coveted pearls; her father had decreed that the *sapphires must* be worn; but she saw no reason why the orthodox birthday present should be withheld. And there was nothing in all the world she would be so delighted with as a "*set of pearls!*"

"What do you call a *set of pearls?*" asked Mr. Osborne, with a smile that told the young lady she had won the day, and that the pearls would certainly be hers on Christmas morning. She could wear them on her real birthday—at the family party, which was to meet, according to custom, at "The Acacias," while the sapphires would come out quite fresh and fair on the eventful evening of the 6th of January.

"What do I call *a set?*" queried Miss Osborne, composedly; "well, a necklace, of course—a lovely necklace, worth at least two hundred pounds. Adelaide's necklace, or rather her mamma's, is worth much more. Then there should be bracelets and earrings to match, and a really beautiful *pendant*. That will quite content me; that is about my idea of '*a set!*'"

"And a very modest idea, too! Queenie, do you suppose I am made of money?"

"Of course not, you ridiculous daddy! I only wish you were. I am passionately fond of jewels, the very finest jewels, of course, and only the very finest. But just now I shall be satisfied with pearls."

"Well, I will think about it, Queenie. Curiously enough,

I was offered some very valuable pearls, last week only, worth a great deal more than you are stipulating for, you little mercenary puss."

"Oh, how awfully delightful! Give me pearls worth a thousand pounds, and I promise you I will not tease you for more gems, till—till I ask you for *diamonds*. I shall not be really and truly happy till I am the possessor of diamonds of the first water—*rose* diamonds I believe they are called."

"I am afraid, then, your happiness will have to be deferred; you must wait for your diamonds till you are lucky enough to marry a *millionaire*. Queenie, my child, I am afraid you have rather a sordid taste; you seem to be developing into a very worldly-minded young woman."

"I suppose I am worldly-minded; I can't help it. It is not in me to be in the least Puritanic; I can't be like my sisters-in-law. Emily was quite delighted when James gave her *Roman* pearls, and Rose fell in love with a ruby ring—a lovely ring, I grant, but still, only a ring, and not even a brooch to match, though John was clever enough to find her a pink *topaz* that went very well with the rubies; and Rose had not the least idea but that she had received a very valuable present. Good, simple little Rose! And I can't be like my darling mother; I sometimes wish I could, for she is a veritable saint. She prizes that beautiful diamond brooch that you gave her on her birthday, chiefly because it was *your* gift. I do believe she would have thought almost, if not quite, as much of worthless Bristol stones, if only you had presented them. And I can't even be like dear good contented Dolly. Father, you must give her something on her birthday, or I shall feel quite greedy and selfish."

"Dolly shall not be forgotten, my dear; but I cannot match your pearls."

"Of course not; valuable jewels would be out of place in poor dear Dolly's possession; she would not prize them, really, and they would be inconsistent. Suppose you gave her a necklace and bracelets of carved coral—they would go so well with her dark complexion and her raven hair. I saw the very things not long ago in a shop in Regent Street,

and I coveted them for myself, only my pockets were quite empty, and Adelaide reminded me that they would not suit my fair skin."

"I can only repeat my promise, Queenie; Dolly shall be duly remembered. And your ball-dress is to be white, you say? I thought you preferred pale blue?"

"And so I do; but the sapphires would be in the way."

"Why? Are not the sapphires *blue*, also?"

"To be sure they are—deeply, darkly, beautifully blue! There is nothing like them, except—so some people say—*my eyes*. They and the sapphires are a perfect match, especially when seen by gaslight. But the blue I always sport is of quite another colour; the dress I shall wear on Christmas-day is of delicate azure blue, and would never go with my splendid 'star sapphires,' which are a sort of violet blue—almost amethystine in some lights; don't you know? There are blues *and* blues, *Monsieur mon père*, and it never answers to blend them rashly. They simply kill each other."

"Do they?" And Mr. Osborne turned away with a sigh. Queenie's thorough worldliness of spirit was becoming more and more painful; there was even an expression on her sweet face at times that seemed to him to cast a shadow on its radiant beauty. Did she think of nothing beyond gems, and costly robes, and brilliant surroundings? Could her soul be so easily satisfied? Or was she like *Undine—soulless*, till the great awakener came?

But Queenie had not yet quite concluded her demands. There was one thing more she wanted, and that she must secure at once. It was not very often that she had her "dear, indulgent, generous old daddy" all to herself for so long a time; her mother she could manage any day, for Chrissie was no match for her politic young daughter, who was getting to be quite an accomplished *diplomate*, when she was set upon gaining her own dear ends. And whenever she had an end to gain it behoved her, at the commencement of the negotiation, to gain her father's consent; it would not be very difficult then, in any case, to win her mother over to her side.

"Father," she resumed, having quite settled the question of different and opposing blue tints, "there is just one thing

more I want to speak to you about, for you know I always like to consult you on every little point. I have come to the conclusion that I must have *a maid* of my own, and immediately, too."

"A maid of your own, my dear? Why, surely all the maids are at your disposal, whenever you choose to command their services? I was telling your mother, a little while ago, that I was afraid we were a little 'over-maided' as it was. But she said she really must engage another housemaid."

"But I'm not referring to housemaids and kitchenmaids—I dare say we are short of something of the kind, you having such an unaccountable prejudice against men-servants! It is a maid for myself, a '*lady's maid*,' that I am talking about; and I should have no objection to her doing Dolly's hair on special occasions. But it is a real qualified lady's maid that I mean to ask mother to engage; a nice, clever, respectable young woman, who knows how to dress an *introduced* young lady."

"Bless me, Queenie, don't you know how to dress yourself? Can't you put your own gowns on, when the dress-maker or milliner sends them home all ready for wearing?"

"You don't understand, father. No girl of my age, and in my rank of life, ever thinks of dispensing with her own personal attendant. And, indeed, I've always required some little assistance at my toilette ever since I can remember."

"But isn't there 'Nurse'? Has she not always presided at your '*toilet*,' as you call it, and at Dolly's, too?"

"Oh, yes; old Nurse has waited on us both for years and years, when we were in the nursery, and when we were in the schoolroom. Now we are '*out*'—at least I am; Dolly means to plod on with Miss Middlemore a little longer, I believe. But Nurse, dear old thing that she is, was never very effective in arranging our *toilettes*, and now she is getting quite past it; her hand shakes, and her sight is very bad; she actually ran a hair-pin into my head only last week, and it is quite tender yet. No! dear old Nursie is really past the kind of service I require; it would hurt her, perhaps, to put her altogether out of office; she would

not like to be entirely superseded ; she could still wait on mother. It does not take a great deal of skill to please mother, and she has been so long used to Nursie. Miss Middlemore needs a little assistance, too, sometimes ; and then, she is very fond of putting Dolly to rights, and doing her long plaits. There will be plenty for Nurse to do, never fear ; I will take care that she does not feel herself deposed — ‘put on the shelf’ — in her own phrase.”

“And what does your mother say to the plan ?”

“We have scarcely talked it over yet” — the truth being that Chrissie had not the smallest notion of what was impending ; “but if you have consented, that is quite enough ; mother is tolerably sure to follow suit.”

“Well, be sure you consult mother before you take any steps ; mother *may* object, you know, and if she objected I should ; and take care what kind of person you engage, for the choice will be pretty much your own, I dare say. Why, Franklin, our church doorkeeper, has a daughter that he wants to place in a respectable situation ; she is a good needlewoman, and understands dressmaking and millinery, he says ; we should be quite sure of her, you know.”

“We should be sure of her respectability, if that is what you mean ; but that would not be enough. I know Maria Franklin, and she is a good girl — a member of the church, of course, and all that ! But church members are not, as a rule, qualified for lady’s maids. I should prefer a Frenchwoman.”

“A Frenchwoman and a Roman Catholic ? But that you shall never have with my consent, Felicia Regina Osborne !”

“Oh, father, I am ‘*Queenie*’ ! You always call me ‘Felicia Regina’ when you are unkind and cross.” And Queenie’s bosom swelled, and her violet-blue eyes instantly were swimming with tears. One word of contradiction, one sentence firmly spoken, was quite sufficient to reduce her to weeping.

“Nonsense, child ! I am not unkind !” continued Mr. Osborne, in rather softer tones. “Only, my dearest Queenie, there are just some few things against which I must enter my protest. I will not have a Papist in my

house! Good, honest Nonconformity has served me very well so far, and I am content to leave well alone, No, my pretty one, don't cry now; I cannot consent to a Frenchwoman on any terms; you must find a sound Protestant, who understands her duties; you may have *two* lady's maids if you want them; only I will not, cannot receive a Papist under my roof!"

"I might find a Protestant Frenchwoman, I should think; Lady Harcourt's governess is a Parisienne, I know, and *not* a Roman Catholic."

"No; she is an Atheist; she calls herself a Positivist; a Comtist—an Agnostic, or something. She repudiates religion altogether, I believe. But *mademoiselle* is not a lady's maid, therefore no rule for you to go by. There are plenty of nice smart lasses, well qualified, and your own countrywomen, I am persuaded. Talk the matter over with your mother; *she* would never consent to harbouring a Papist, perhaps a *Jesuit*, under her roof! Your mother, bless her, is as staunch as I am, and in some respects stauncher, for she is more consistent, and a Protestant to the bottom of her dear warm heart."

"Very well," said Queenie, with an air of martyr-like resignation, only she spoilt the *pose* with just a little pout. "Only, I suppose the maid, whoever she may turn out to be, will have to wait upon me, not upon you, or upon my mother. It is only fair that I should make my own selection."

"If you were in your own house, Queenie, I certainly should not attempt to restrain your choice; but as things are, I suppose it is I who will have to pay the young woman's wages."

Queenie contented herself with making a little *moue*, and no more was said about the nationality of the maid, and she left her father with the understanding that his wishes were to be respected. An hour afterwards she was discussing the subject with her mother and with Dolly. Mrs. Osborne, after a little doubt, gave her consent to the new addition to her household; only she entirely agreed with her husband that Queenie's personal attendant *must be* an English or Scotch or Welsh *Protestant*.

"Scotch—*or* Welsh!" protested the young lady indignantly. "No, thank you; the female 'Taffy' would dress me up in Welsh flannel, or *grogam*, whatever that may be, and put leeks in my hair! The 'Sandy' woman would array me in a Highland plaid, and add a wreath of thistles!"

But it ended in Mrs. Osborne undertaking to find her daughter a suitable bower-maiden, of British birth and orthodox faith. And as Dolly was going that afternoon to take tea with her step-mother, she said to her, as she was leaving for Brixton Hill, "Just mention the subject to Mrs. Derrington, Dolly; she may know of the very person who would suit us. She found me that cook that has been with us almost eight years, and a better or more respectable servant I never had; the kitchenmaid, too, was of her providing; and no one could be more satisfactory. Perhaps she may help us to a lady's maid, a nice, clean, dainty, little girl, with taste and clever fingers, and good tempered, too. For you know, Dolly, our dear Queenie has her moods now and then, and everybody would not put up with her."

"It is not at all improbable that Mrs. Derrington may know the very person that would suit," agreed Dolly. "I will talk it over with her this evening; she is always wanting a situation for some *protégée* or other. That large Bible-class of hers furnishes people with no end of confidential servants! and some of the girls are very nice and genteel in their ways; I knew of one who would just have pleased Queenie—served her apprenticeship with a West-end milliner, too; only she is married."

Clearly the *ci-devant* milliner was quite out of the question; and so, it seemed, were a good many dependable young people whom Mrs. Derrington knew, and whose capabilities and characters were discussed after tea. And Dolly was just inquiring about a certain Susan Saunders when Mrs. Fred Chapman walked into the room, and professed herself delighted to meet her "dearest Dolores."

"Who are you talking about?" asked Mrs. Chapman, when Mrs. Derrington, after singing the praises of the person in question, added, "but she is just engaged to be

married, and getting ready to go out to Canada ; so I could not recommend her, you know."

"Recommend who, and to whom?" queried Mrs. Chapman, quite sharply. "Does Mrs. Osborne want another servant? Because I know of a most excellent young woman—a perfect *treasure*!"

"What kind of situation does the young woman want?"

"Under-housemaid, I believe; but she would not be too particular; she is so anxious to take service in a really religious family; the Osbornes would be exactly to her mind, and they would secure a domestic well worth having."

"The situation would *not* suit your 'treasure,' then, I am afraid," responded Mrs. Derrington, drily; "it is a lady's maid, not a housemaid of any description who is required. The young woman whom Mrs. Osborne is seeking must know something of millinery, and must not be quite ignorant of dressmaking. I am afraid, Dolly, I cannot at this moment recommend any desirable person; but I will bear the matter in mind. You know, I keep a sort of amateur or honorary registry office."

And then for the moment the conversation dropped, and Jennie's poor sickly baby became the subject of discourse. Only Mrs. Chapman made very few remarks, and answered strangely at cross purposes, till, just as Dolores was getting up to take leave—Mrs. Osborne having sent the brougham for her—Mrs. Chapman roused herself as if from a brown study. She followed Dolly upstairs, when she went to put on her cloak and bonnet, and said, "Dolly, dear, it strikes me that I *do* know just the very young woman you want; she would be delighted to wait on your beautiful Queenie. I'll send her up to 'The Acacias.'"

"Oh, no, please *don't*—I mean don't take the trouble," replied Dolly, aghast at the very idea.

The Osbornes' and the Chapmans' estimate of people and things was so essentially different that it was most improbable—next to impossible, indeed—that any kind of business could be transacted between them. Any attempt at coalescence, of whatever nature, must inevitably result in worse than disappointment—in actual discomfiture and mutual annoyance.

CHAPTER XVI.

QUEENIE DISCOVERS A TREASURE.

"I DO hope Kitty will think better of it," said Dolly to Mrs. Osborne, when they were exchanging good-nights over the dressing-room fire of the latter. "I wonder how it came into her head to interfere on our account; the persons she would recommend would be precisely the most unsuitable to be discovered."

"Still," returned Mrs. Osborne, "the most extraordinary *contretemps* do happen. Somebody *might* unexpectedly turn up from the most unlooked for sources; nevertheless, I would as soon be under no obligation to Mrs. Chapman. Perhaps I ought to be ashamed of myself; but, really—and I think I could not help it—I took a rooted dislike to your sister Kitty the very first time I saw her; I do not very often take an antipathy, but something of the kind visited me then, and it has never really passed away. On the whole, I would rather have no further dealings with her, and certainly none with her *protégée*; but I dare say we shall hear no more of it."

And for a day or two they did not; but on the third morning a "young person" was announced as waiting in the breakfast-room to see Mrs. Osborne. She professed herself to be "come after the vacant situation."

Queenie was under the dressmaker's hands, so in the first instance she did not appear, and her mother, with Dolly in attendance, interviewed the candidate. Both the elder and the younger lady were stricken with astonishment when they beheld a sturdily-built, dark-browed young woman, most vulgarly dressed. She wore about as much cheap finery and gilt jewellery as she could well carry; her dress was flame colour, and flounced up to the waist; her bonnet was of green cotton velvet, magnificently trimmed with something that was supposed to represent the plumage of a

bird of Paradise ; she carried an imitation ermine muff, very much the worse for wear, and the same showy, inexpensive fur, only rather dirtier, was round her neck. An enormous Scotch pebble brooch, in a very brassy setting ; a chain, and presumably a watch to match ; tawdry ear-rings and massive bracelets of some sort completed the would-be Abigail's attire. Gloves she had none ; and both Mrs. Osborne and Dolly noted that she had strong brawny arms and bony wrists, but fingers singularly lithe and slender.

"You come from Mrs. Chapman, I think ?" said Mrs. Osborne, scarcely knowing how to begin, and only anxious to dismiss her visitor ; "I am afraid you will not suit."

"Oh, I know my work," replied the woman, confidently ; "know it as well as anybody can, and p'r'aps a little better than most. I've served my time to a Court milliner, and I've learnt the dressmaking *and* the hair-dressing. I quite understand how to dress a *lady*."

Judging from her appearance, both her auditors felt disposed to discredit the assertion ; her own toilet being as vulgar as it was ill-chosen ; she had manifestly no particle of taste.

"What is your name, and how old are you ?" was Mrs. Osborne's next demand, chiefly because she must say something.

"My name is Bella Fowkes, and I am turned thirty-two: I've had a lot of experience ; I've dressed many a lady for a Lord Mayor's feast."

And Miss Bella's accent was simply atrocious.

"I really think we need not detain you," continued Mrs. Osborne ; "you are not at all the kind of person whom we require."

"But I should think *I am* !" boldly retorted Bella. "Though I'm looking out for a situation, I'm not at all a common person. My family have come down in the world, lost a heap through the failure of a bank, and I'm very well educated. I speak French and German ; I'm a *clergyman's daughter* !"

"Indeed ! then I am sure we need confer no longer ; a clergyman's daughter would not do for us. We are Non-conformists."

"I'd put up with that, provided wages and perquisites were satisfactory; it's all one with me, whether I go to church *or* chapel, provided the place is a real good one, and the missis kind-hearted."

"That closes the transaction," replied Mrs. Osborne, gravely; "my husband would not allow me to receive into our household a young person of *no* particular principles. We should be much more likely to tolerate an avowed Episcopalian, though we should infinitely prefer a dependant of our own faith."

"*Lors!* but you *are* illiberal!" sneered Miss Fowkes.

"Comments are quite unnecessary," returned Mrs. Osborne; "I do not request your opinions; and I do not think we should be the happier with *you* as a member of our household, let your religious or irreligious professions be what they may."

"Irreligious, indeed! I like that; and me, a clergyman's daughter, properly brought up, and *confirmed* by my Lord Bishop."

"Who is your father, may I ask?"

For a moment Miss Fowkes hesitated; she seemed to labour under some uncertainty as regarded her reverend parent. "It ain't no use explaining," she at length replied; "I don't suppose you chapel-folks knows much about *our* clergy; my father was the Keverend Mawbey, and he was high up in the Church, I can promise you."

"But if he was Mr. Mawbey, how comes it that your name is *Fowkes*?"

"Oh! I'm married, of course; but he was only my stepfather, anyhow. Is that the daughter you wanted me to wait upon? I was told she was an out-and-out beauty; but there's tastes in looks as well as in religions. *I* call her quite ordinary."

"I will thank you to leave us. I have no time to waste," said Chrissie, rising, and ringing the bell rather nervously. The insolent bearing and tone of Miss Fowkes quite appalled her; and it increased with every moment of her stay. She was devoutly thankful when the reverend gentleman's accomplished daughter was escorted from the room, looking back with a mocking smile as he disappeared.

Chrissie sank into her chair when she heard the hall door closed, and gasped out—"She is no clergyman's daughter! Dolly, I don't believe your sister had anything to do with sending her. What does it all mean?"

"Indeed, I do not—cannot guess;" replied Dolly, who was feeling too bewildered at once to collect her senses. "Of course, her father is no clergyman; he is not even a reputable character, I should say, but a thief and a sharper! Her name ought to have been *Betsy Prig*; and she must be the daughter of a typical *Bill Sykes*! Clergyman, indeed! If he was ever, by mistake, called *reverend*, he was drummed out of the Establishment long ago—had his gown stripped off him, struck out of the clergy-list, or whatever they do to expel impostors."

"And, doubtless, Bella Fowkes, *alias* Mawbey, is an impostor herself. But, Dolly, how came your sister to send her here? She must have known that we neither could, would, nor should engage her in any capacity. I should say Kitty is by no means easily deceived herself, and she must have known positively that woman was *not* what she professed to be. She seems to me like a bad character of the lowest type. Do you think Mrs. Chapman meant to *insult* us, Dolly?"

"I don't know," answered Dolly, almost tearfully. "I wish with all my heart she had selected another evening to visit my stepmother. I cannot understand it; it is incomprehensible. I can only *hope* that Kitty knows nothing at all about her—that she never saw or spoke to this dreadful woman. I should be afraid to spend an hour with her; I would not be alone in the house in her company for the world."

"Well! she is gone," exclaimed Chrissie presently, with a sigh of intense relief; "let us hope we shall never meet her again? I trust Sarah saw her safe off the premises. What will Nurse say?"

The longer the ladies discussed the matter, the more puzzling it became. Queenie, when she heard of the interview, decided that the *pseudo* clergyman's daughter was actually a female burglar, and came under false pretences that she might learn something of the ways of the house,

intending to return in the middle of the night with her accomplices.

And Mr. Osborne, though he affected to laugh at Queenie's apprehensions, was really a little nervous, and declared that he would take extra precautions in going round the house for a few nights—a ceremony he always performed in person ; and he had new bolts put upon the back kitchen door, and defences added to the conservatory and to several garden entrances.

"And all this comes of your wanting a fine, 'niminy-piminy' waiting-maid, young lady!" he said, when he was going on his rounds after the servants had retired to rest. "I sincerely wish that descendant of the 'Rev. Mawbey' had never found her way inside 'The Acacias.' It's very much your fault, Regina."

"And it is very much your fault, father—I think I shall take to saying 'Papa,' or even 'Pap-pa,' when you call me Regina!—it is quite your fault that we are without *men-servants* in the house. It would be so much more secure if we had a butler and a footman, at least. Unless Philip is at home, you alone represent the garrison."

But Dolly felt it incumbent on her to find out whether Kitty actually had any hand at all in the affair ; had Mrs. or Miss Fowkes really offered herself at Mrs. Chapman's suggestion ? The question was very easily settled ; Dolly went again to take tea at Vine Cottage, and, curiously enough, after Mrs. Derrington had listened to the whole uncomfortable story, Mrs. Chapman again appeared.

"What impelled you to send us such a suspicious person?" asked Dolly, indignantly.

"Ah, well ! I don't know !" answered Kitty, coolly "I am sorry I did send her, if you did not like her. She is a very respectable person—quite well connected."

"Do you know her?"

"She was maid to a personal friend of my own, whom I trust, and who knows all about her. She has travelled a great deal, and is a milliner in a thousand ! I am sorry she did not please Mrs. Osborne."

"Is she married?"

"Oh, dear no ; by no means."

"But she said she was!"

"Oh, did she? Well, perhaps she *is* a widow; I am sure I forget."

"But she said her father was a *clergyman*?"

"So he was, I suppose, if she said so. Perhaps he *pretended* to be in orders; that is a trick that is very commonly played by worthless adventurers; and you cannot lay on her her parent's faults. But I dare say he was all right, perhaps offended his Bishop, perhaps was a little unorthodox, and was refused his licence, or whatever it is, before clergymen can preach. But I cannot say, I don't know much of her antecedents; only I do know that she was a perfectly qualified person, and would have dressed Miss Osborne to perfection, and saved her pocket besides. I thought to serve your patroness, Dolly; but, of course, I wasn't likely to be of much account in her eyes—*my* recommendation wouldn't be much approved! I won't trouble myself again, I promise you. Dolores Derrington, if Mrs. Osborne came to me now, on her bended knees, to beg of me to find servants for her, I wouldn't as much as put out my little finger to get her an under-kitchenmaid. It's insulting to treat a lady's reference with contempt, as mine has been treated; and you may tell Mrs. Osborne so, Dolly, when you go back to her; and tell her from me that, as she evidently never learned manners, I'd advise her to lose no time in taking a few lessons in common politeness."

Mrs. Chapman said a great deal more that is not worth recording, declaring herself downright "affronted," so "shockingly vexed, and so slighted," and she didn't know what her husband would say when *he* heard how she had been treated; it always put him in a dreadful "*wax*" to see his own wife humiliated. Dolly bit her lips, lest she should, in the heat of the moment, say something that she would afterwards regret. She only replied that surely Mrs. Osborne had every right to make her own selection, and that Kitty, she was quite sure, had never really supposed that Miss Fowkes would be at all suitable.

"Well, she's been cruelly disappointed, poor thing!" was Mrs. Chapman's conclusion; "and I think I shall engage her myself, and I don't see why I shouldn't keep a

lady's-maid as well as those that fancy themselves so much my betters. I can well afford it, and Chapman never begrudges me anything that money can pay for. Besides, it's only Christian-like to look after the widow and the orphan—don't the Bible itself say so? But I've done with finding other people servants; and done with serving, or trying to serve, the *chapel folks* who are so extra pious—for ever and for ever. Amen."

And, without more ado, Mrs. Chapman flounced out of her stepmother's parlour; and let herself out, banging the front door with a violence that resounded throughout the house.

"I cannot at all understand it," said Mrs. Derrington, when all was quiet, laying down her spectacles as she spoke, and as she always did when she was very much perplexed. "What was Kitty's motive for sending this extraordinary person to 'The Acacias'? She could not have had any idea that she would be engaged—that she would be even considered. What does it all mean? Kitty never acts without a motive."

"I am perfectly bewildered," replied Dolly; "the more I think of it, the more mystified I am; for, as you say, Kitty has a meaning in all she does. I did hope till I saw her, and heard her admit the 'recommendation,' that Miss Fowkes had simply invented it. But I am most thankful, mother, that she was not at all a presentable person—that there could not be the least possible question about entering into negotiations with her. I wish you had seen Bella Fowkes—and *heard* her; you would have been both amazed and frightened."

"On the whole, child, I am glad I did not. I am only too grieved to think that she should be acquainted with Kitty at all. And Kitty is only pretending to be angry, I am almost sure. I cannot make it out! I cannot fathom the mystery! I hope I never shall."

"And Queenie's suggestion was so terrible. She would have it that the woman was in league with burglars, and Mr. Osborne, as I told you, thinks it only prudent to take certain precautions."

Mrs. Derrington looked troubled as she answered, "Say

no more about it, Dolly ; the whole affair makes me uncomfortable ; and poor Kitty is so entirely under the control of her unprincipled husband."

"Surely you do not think——"

"I think nothing, Dolly. Even admitting so horrible a possibility, a more likely person would have been selected to play the spy. Had she really wished for opportunities, she would have dissembled—she would have refrained from actual rudeness, which was certain to lead to her speedy expulsion. How long was she in the house?"

"Not half an hour, at the outside, if it was so long. We went to her almost immediately after we heard of her arrival, and the errand on which she came. She was shown straight into the breakfast parlour, which is just across the hall, you know. Fanny, the housemaid, saw her into the room ; Sarah, the parlourmaid, answered Mrs. Osborne's bell, and dismissed her—saw her down the drive and out at the gate, and watched her take the nearest path over the Common. No, mother ; I think we need not concern ourselves with any supposition of the kind. I do not feel in the least afraid ; nor did the affair make any lasting impression on Queenie, who has a nervous dread of burglars. The puzzle to me is, *why* did Kitty send us a person whom she must have been positive could have been nothing but repulsive and suspicious?"

"We can only suppose she did it out of pure mischief—thought it would be fine fun to astonish Mrs. Osborne. She meant it—the whole thing—as a *hoax*, a practical joke, which I know she very much enjoys. Let us be thankful, child, that her jest was carried no further, nor led to any disastrous result."

"I am thankful ; I will try to think no more about it ; but, any way, I am ashamed of Kitty. She was, to say the least of it, annoying and insulting—I am afraid purposely so. It was like a vulgar, stupid *charade* very badly planned and acted."

And that seemed to be the only explanation of the whole extraordinary occurrence. Mrs. Osborne, having much upon her mind just then, quickly forgot her brief vexation ; and Queenie was more anxious than ever to find exactly the

attendant who would do all that she required. "For I must have her," said Miss Osborne, "with no more delay. I have made up my mind that she shall dress me on Christmas-eve."

Within the next few days some half-dozen young persons presented themselves, all with undeniable testimonials; but Queenie, who made a point of interviewing them every one, could not resolve upon *any* candidate. Impatient, as usual, to come to a final settlement—for delay always caused her irritation—she was about to decide upon the young person who pleased her most, and who bore an irreproachable character—the only objection being her very short sight.

But next day the precise person arrived for whom she had been seeking in vain; a very pretty, ladylike young person, with a winning expression of countenance, neatly but elegantly attired, and "so very well spoken," as Nurse declared. Queenie, charmed by her gentle manner and respectful deportment, quite as much as by her evident taste and skill, would have engaged her on the spot; but Mrs. Osborne insisted on the orthodox inquiries being instituted.

And "Susanna South" herself insisted upon her references being duly considered. She had heard of the situation through a cousin of hers who was on the list of a certain *Registry Office* at the West End, and who had advised her to try her fortune with Miss Osborne, as Caroline Stevens, one of the applicants whom Queenie had, after some hesitation, rejected, had given a very good account of the place, and deeply regretted her own incapacity in several particulars.

"And whom am I to write to?" asked Queenie, when everything except the matter of testimonials was satisfactorily disposed of; "my mother insists on my being extremely particular."

"Here is the address," answered Susanna; "and please do not delay writing beyond Thursday at the latest, as my late lady, I know, is leaving town for several months almost immediately, and I cannot very well afford to be out of an engagement, as I have an infirm parent on my hands, and a married sister in the country very much out of health, who needs all the assistance I can give her."

"I will write to Mrs. Barrington at once—this very evening; and if her reply satisfy me, I shall wish you to be at your post by Christmas-eve, or even a little earlier, if you can make it convenient. But I do not think I asked you why you are leaving Mrs. Barrington?"

"My lady will satisfy you, madam, that it was through no fault of mine. She is as sorry, if I may say so much, to part with me as I am to part from her; for a better, kinder, dearer mistress never lived. There were family circumstances, which, of course, are no business of mine, though my dear lady reposed all confidence in me; but the fact is that Mrs. Barrington is not going, for the present, to engage another personal attendant. I should be obliged, madam, in writing for my testimonials, if you will just ask the question."

"Very well! And you are quite sure you can manage my hair?"

"Well, madam, I would not attempt it if I feared failure; but a sweet young lady, whom I once had the honour of waiting upon—Lady Selina Severn—she is gone to a better world now, poor darling—was fatally injured by a railway accident!—my lady Selina had hair exactly like yours—just the same rare colour, and just the same fine quality. I have not the smallest misgiving about your hair, Miss Osborne; I can do my duty by *that*, be assured. Mrs. Barrington had not luxuriant hair, but I think she will say that I made the very best of it."

"And you can alter a dress, if it is not quite to my own taste? I am very particular—my mother says fastidious."

"I always satisfied Mrs. Barrington, and also the sainted Lady Selina. And I can, I think, adapt myself to any one's style. Now the dress you are wearing, madam, would not exactly please me. If I had had the honour to be your maid when that dress came home I should have disposed the front pleats quite differently, and I should have arranged the skirt so as to ensure a more graceful sweep."

And Susanna and her future mistress parted mutually satisfied with each other. "I never saw a girl with nicer manners," Queenie assured her mother and Dolly; "and

her tone of voice is so soft and sweet I almost envy her. She is so very respectful, too—quite a contrast to the maid that the Harcourt girls share between them ; and superior even to Florence's magnificent attendant, who gives herself airs that I never could put up with, in spite of her 'genius,' according to Mrs. L'Estrange. If I can secure this almost perfect Susanna I shall not regret my father's prohibition—I shall not even envy Alice's vaunted *femme de chambre*."

"Well, my dear," replied Mrs. Osborne, "I trust you will not be disappointed ; though really, Queenie, I do think it is rather an absurd whim of yours to want your own especial maid. I would not be hampered with such an incumbrance if she would pay me to accept her services."

"Ah, well, mother dear," replied Queenie, carelessly, "you and I are so very different, you know."

It pleased Queenie to write quite a long letter to Mrs. Barrington, making all sorts of especial inquiries, and explaining, almost diffusely, the exact sort of attendant she was seeking. Mrs. Barrington was a lady who objected, on principle, to giving *vivâ voce* characters to her servants ; she always preferred to write ; and Queenie despatched her letter by that evening's post, and as soon as it was possible she received an answer. It ran thus :—

"To Miss Osborne,

"The Acacias,

"Clapham Common, S. W.

"DEAR MADAM,—You inquire as to the character and efficiency of my late maid, Susanna South. I have much pleasure in assuring you that she will more than entirely answer your expectations. No Frenchwoman could possibly dress her lady so perfectly well, and at the same time so quickly and with so little trouble. She has made many of my best dresses entirely—I prefer her style to that of several of the first houses, and she has, I think, taken lessons from *Truefitt* ; she has really a genius for doing hair effectively, and can make even a few poor wisps like mine go a great way. She is very kind and sympathising if one is in any trouble, and she is blessed with a most retentive memory. I really believe she *cannot* forget !

"I am parting with her simply because I do not, for certain reasons which are private, and which I need not specify, require the services of a *lady's-maid*. To be candid, I cannot any longer *afford* to pay a personal attendant. I do not know why I should be ashamed to confess that I have suffered reverses. Had not Susanna other claims, too sacred to trifle with, she would have served me for anything I might be able to spare from my now limited resources. She did make a most generous proposal, which, in pure justice to her true-heartedness, I think I ought to mention; but which, knowing all her circumstances, I felt it to be my duty to decline. Otherwise, I should thankfully have retained her, and she would have accompanied me to Paris, for which place I am starting *immediately*.

"Now, dear madam, I trust I have answered all your inquiries, and I hope you will find as much comfort from the attendance of Susanna South as it has been mine gratefully to accept. No amount of wages could really repay her faithful services; and if you have the good fortune to attach her to yourself, as I was able to do, you will understand *why* I write that word '*gratefully*.'

"I remain, Madam, yours sincerely,

"AUGUSTA BARRINGTON.

"*Brook Street, Grosvenor Square, W.*

"P.S.—You ask if I can answer for Susanna's true Protestantism. Certainly I can; for she always attended the same place of worship as myself, and I am a Protestant *Nonconformist*."

"Nothing could be more satisfactory, could it, mother?" asked Queenie, brimming over with delight. "What a blessing it was that Caroline Stevens should have taken the trouble to chatter with Susanna's cousin!—though I do not in the least remember which of the inefficient young women Miss Stevens was; I don't even recall the name. But that is of no consequence; I fancy it was the girl who had such an ugly mouth, and showed her teeth so badly. We have certainly been fortunate enough to discover a treasure; and I am quite as glad on your account as on my own, mother,

for my maid will certainly be a servant after your own heart."

"I trust, my dear, you will find her all you anticipate. I regret, though, that Mrs. Barrington could not, or would not, grant us an interview. We could have driven to Brook Street so conveniently yesterday, when we were in Regent Street."

"I dare say, mother, she was far too busy to receive any one, even on business; you see she says she is leaving for Paris 'immediately.' Perhaps that means to-day—this morning, by the early train; and she will have all her own packing to do, poor lady!"

And then she asked Dolly if she thought a *nicer* "character" could ever have been given.

"No, dear," replied Dolly; "it is a very good character."

"But you don't speak heartily; there is something you don't *quite* like about it. I am sure it is frank enough."

"Yes! it is very frank."

"What is the matter, then?"

"Well, since you will have it, Queenie, I do not like the handwriting."

"It is not *very* good, I grant; but better than that of many well-educated people. What a scrawl Mrs. John Smallwood writes, to be sure; witness that letter mother received from her with Sarah's character! What fault do you find with poor Mrs. Barrington's caligraphy?"

"I can hardly tell, Queenie. It is the kind of handwriting that does *not* inspire me with confidence. The letter is written with perfect frankness; but I should doubt whether the writer were equally ingenuous in herself."

"Now, Dolly, I am out of all patience with you!" cried Queenie, wrathfully. "Do you call that Christian charity? What a fidget you are? And a person of your own *faith*, too!"

"What do I know about her faith?" was the response that trembled on Dolly's lips; but she refrained, and said merely, "All Nonconformists are not necessarily sincere people."

On Christmas-eve Susanna South punctually appeared, and dressed her mistress to admiration. Yes; she was

certainly "nice looking;" she had a pure, clear complexion, straight-features, and smooth, neatly-arranged, dark hair. Her manners were undeniably good, and her tone was most respectful. She moved, too, with extreme quietness, and evidently was in perfect training, as regarded the young lady's *toilette*. She did everything so gently, so easily, and with so much simple grace, that Miss Osborne was enchanted, and congratulated herself, again and again, on having achieved such a triumphant success.

Even Mrs. Osborne professed herself well satisfied, though she could not help wishing that her daughter had been content without this addition to the establishment. Nurse said she did not quite "take to Susanna;" but that might be natural prejudice, and dear old Nursie was given to a certain distrust of persons whom she knew nothing about, except by hearsay. Chrissie remembered how she had cherished injurious suspicions of the cook, recommended years before by Mrs. Derrington; now her own trusted and most intimate friend! Dolly quietly contemplated Susanna's countenance; and decided that, pleasing as it was, she could not quite like it; there was something in it, though she could not say what, that she secretly disapproved. Happily no one asked her opinion, so she kept her thoughts to herself.

There was a large family-gathering at "The Acacias" on Christmas-day, and Queenie appeared resplendent in pale blue velvet, and pearls that Nurse declared to be "worth a king's ransom!" And her fond father felt well repaid when she came into his dressing-room to kiss him and thank him for his "too costly" present.

There were other gifts, also, from other members of the family, and Dolly, too, had her due share. She received from Mr. Osborne a handsome *parure* of rich carved coral, which went "beautifully"—according to Susanna South—with her magnificent dark, satiny braids of hair and her almost southern complexion.



CHAPTER XVII.

SUSANNA'S DIARY.

SUSANNA SOUTH had abundance of employment all through that festive Christmas week; for Miss Osborne had an engagement for every evening, except Sunday, up to the fourth of January. An invitation for the fifth she had the courage to decline, because, as she remarked, "I must be quite fresh for Thursday; I shall be in demand all the morning, for the workpeople and the waiters must take their final orders from me; and I need not say I mean to dance all night, if I can only be sure of plenty of incomparable partners. Nor do I care very much about the Marshalls' party; they know how to give a very decent entertainment, I dare say; but they are rather dull and heavy—what you and I call goody-goody people, you know, Adelaide."

Mrs. Fairfax did not appear at "The Acacias" on Christmas-day, for she had a modest little gathering of her own, her sons and grandchildren spending the day very happily with "grandmother," at Marlborough Terrace. But before the old year was quite out she left her quiet home for her brother's luxurious abode, that she might spend a few days with Jonathan and Chrissie, and help the girls in their preparations for the great Twelfth-night party, at which she and her sons and daughters-in-law were expected to be present. She had not been to Clapham for several months, and she was a little amazed at the sweeping changes that were being made in the Osborne household. She saw very little of Queenie, for she breakfasted always now in her own room, and held cabinet councils with her maid till the morning was far advanced. Later on in the day the Harcourt girls or Miss L'Estrange were sure to arrive, assisting Queenie with their welcome advice and experience; one or more of them was sure to stay and dine *en famille* at "The Acacias." As Queenie always had an

engagement for the evening, she never formed one of the family circle round the hearth. Aunt Rachel took note of much that passed, but made no comment, till one evening, when she and Chrissie were alone by the fireside, she looked up suddenly from her work, and exclaimed: "Well, we are deserted to-night; our young ladies are not of much use in their own home, I think. I used to pine for a daughter; but, on the whole, I am thankful that God gave me only sons! I am getting out of conceit with daughters, I am afraid."

"You are vexed with Queenie for being so gay; but young people are very much engaged just now, you know. Everybody is giving a little party of some sort this week, or next; and Emily, and Rose, and Alice, all have their juvenile gatherings. Phoebe is spending the time with her own people, at Cheltenham, and Oliver is with her, or there would be one more family entertainment, I suppose. As for Jonathan, he is at the church meeting, where I ought to be, also, only Mr. Grahame says I am not to go out after dark this winter; and Dolly is with him."

"I am glad Dolly is not quite a woman of the world. But *she* has been out every evening since I came, I think?"

"Well, I suppose she has; and what harm can there be, in being out on occasion, three or even six evenings running? One night she went with Queenie to Kensington, to meet the Rivers, who are all very fond of her—Emily, in particular; the next, she was at John's house by special invitation; she is quite a favourite with our good little Rose; and just now she is in her proper place, and looking after 'father,' who never cares to go out alone to church, or meeting of any kind. They will be in directly—though, as this is the last Church meeting of the year, it may be a little later."

"Queenie has not joined the Church yet?"

"No, she has not; and really, Rachel, I say it with pain, but I cannot wish her to join in her present frame of mind. I am afraid I could not conscientiously recommend her to membership; every month she seems further and further from us; it is very sad, but she is very worldly-minded."

"Chrissie, I have no business to say anything, but I

must ask : Is there no fault of your own ? Is it well that a girl of seventeen should follow her own will in almost every particular ? ”

“ What good would come of constraining a girl like Queenie ? We cannot make her love the things we love ; a profession of religion should be—must be—purely spontaneous.”

“ Without doubt. And God forbid that there should be the least profession when there is no possession of personal piety. The child must come of her own free will, not as a matter of orthodoxy, because she is old enough, nor because it would please her father and you ; but that she longs to give herself to the Lord.”

“ Rachel, I can do nothing. I have but little influence over my child. You can do nothing ; but you can *pray* for her. I sometimes think if there was no such relief as prayer my heart would be well-nigh broken. I thank God for my five good Christian boys ; but, oh ! my spirit yearns for my darling's conversion to better things.”

“ She will be with us to-morrow night, surely ? ”

“ No ; she will not. To-morrow night the L'Estranges give their great ball ; she would not miss it on any account.”

“ She will dance the old year out and the new year in, I dare say, according to the thoughtless custom of the unthinking world. Now, Chrissie, I do think I am not a narrow-minded woman, but there does seem to me something so terribly irreligious, so utterly careless of the future, in such a frivolous course of conduct.”

“ You do not think that dancing is a sin, surely ? ”

“ Oh, no, no ! God forbid that I should be a self-righteous Pharisee, such as I *have* known. The mere act of dancing is as free from actual worldliness as eating, or drinking, or playing the piano. There is a time to dance, and a time to refrain from dancing, as there is a time and season for every purpose under heaven. Now, the last night of the dying year is *not* the time wherein the children of Christian parents should be thoughtlessly amusing themselves. If they cannot pass those last solemn moments of the year in prayer, let them at least pass it in sober reflec-

tion, or else in wholesome sleep. There are a few—a very few—exceptions, I grant, in which mothers and fathers should be absolutely imperative, and this, I do think, is one of them. You had no right, as a member of a Christian church,—Jonathan had no right to allow Queenie to fling herself headlong into such a vortex of dissipation as I gather, from all accounts, she is preparing to do. Let her enjoy herself as much as a reasonable young woman can desire ; let her dance—young things must dance ! Let her take her ease—within bounds, of course ; let her please herself in most things, for you only defeat your ends in drawing the reins too tightly ; but rule your own household ; allow judicious freedom, but no wilfulness ; above all, don't permit liberty to degenerate into licence. There must be some sort of discipline in every Christian household, or it loses the right, all too quickly to be classed as Christian."

"You disapprove of balls, I know, Rachel."

"I do, and I do not. I cannot approve of such monstrous entertainments, such indiscriminate revel, such lavish waste, as I can see you are preparing for here ; and, what is more, Chrissie, I am sure you do not approve of it yourself ; to say the least, it is inconsistent. As for Jonathan, he only shakes his head, and says he would rather give a supper to half the poor in London."

"And so he would ; and so would I ! We promised Queenie and Dolly *a dance* to celebrate their mutual birthday ; we never thought of a regular ball. And now I stand aghast, and so does my husband, at sight of the extremes to which we are being carried, in spite of our better judgment, as it seems to me. We never gave such an entertainment in all our married lives. I devoutly trust we shall never give another."

"You must do more than *trust* ; you must resolve to be firm in future. Now, I suppose, it is too late to retract anything ?"

"Quite too late. Jonathan and I have both been to blame ; he said to-night, when he was waiting for Dolly, 'we must make the best of it now, Chrissie ; we must perforce go on to the bitter end—pray God, this folly may be the last !' "

"It must be the last, Chrissie ; your husband is as weak as water where that child is concerned ; you must help him to be firm. In some things you are stronger, I believe, than he is—you have a clearer sense of imperative duty. My dear Chrissie, don't be angry with me. What am I that I should play the mentor?—but, oh, be sure that if you do not turn over a new leaf, and demonstrate your lawful authority—the authority with which God Himself endows all Christian parents, you will, indeed, go on to the bitter end!—and *bitter*, indeed, will that end be, if it involve the ruin of your darling child."

"Ruin! Oh, Rachel—surely, such utter misery will never befall us. We do fear God."

"I know you do, and the extreme of calamity may not come in your day. Remember Eli ; he feared God, and, in his own person served Him, too ; but he failed to restrain his children, and they suffered the consequences. Now, you are crying, Chrissie, and I don't wonder. I am croaking like a bird of ill-omen, and prophesying all evil things ; forgive me, I am almost crying myself ; but I cannot quite say, '*forget* what I have spoken.' There, they are come home, I think, Dolly and Jonathan ; I heard their voices on the stairs."

So there that conversation ended, and the household retired to rest in good time. Queenie did not return till almost five o'clock on New Year's-eve, Susanna South having obligingly sat up for her young mistress. But next morning, or rather the same day, after Queenie had slept and breakfasted, and inspected her *toilette* for the evening, there were some slight passages between mother and daughter.

Mrs. Osborne came up to Queenie's room where she was still engaged with Susanna South, and had no sooner seated herself than she said, "My dear, I have something that I want to say to you ; send your maid into another room."

Without a word, and with the merest glance from her mistress, Susanna withdrew. Queenie quietly awaited her mother's intimation. She was a wonderfully self-possessed young person, was Felicia Regina Osborne, and she had marvellously quick perceptions for her years ; she felt sure,

on the instant, that her mother had something to say to which she herself would take exception ; but she comforted herself with the remembrance that all was virtually settled, and that it was quite too late to make any important alterations in the forthcoming festivity. She had had her own way in every particular ; she had won the victory from first to last, save in the one instance of the card-tables ; and she had scarcely cared to struggle for a point on which she had so little personal interest—next, indeed, to none.

“Queenie,” began Mrs. Osborne, “I have issued one more invitation. I have added another name to the list you brought to me, almost a month ago. I have written myself to Annie Derrington, requesting the pleasure of her company to a *dance*, given in honour of the mutual birthday of Miss Osborne and Miss Dolores Derrington.”

“*Mother!* what possessed you to do so strange a thing ? We decided that Annie was *not* to be asked.”

“You said you would not ask her yourself, because you did not like her ; but I differed from you, and felt that I had a full right to invite any friend to *my* house, though it is your ball.”

“A full right !—yes, of course ; but I don’t think it is quite good taste ; there is, to my mind, something extremely incongruous in mingling guests of such opposite stations. And, mother, I end as I began, I do not care for Miss Annie Derrington !”

“But you care for Dolly Derrington ?”

“That is another affair. Dolly is my sister—my adopted sister, as all the world knows. But I thought it was quite understood that *only* Dolly was to be one of ourselves ; with the rest of the family we were to have no relations. Perhaps you have extended your hospitality to Mrs. Chapman and the delectable Mrs. Hancox ?”

“Do not be disagreeable, Queenie. You do not imagine I have done anything of the kind ; I thought it only in the fitness of things, only just and right, that Dolly should have one of her own people at the *ball* which is given for her as well as for you. Now, my dear, make no more ado, for I will not have Dolly hurt ; the invitation is issued—and accepted.”

"Dolly has not said one word about any of her own family," rejoined Queenie, sullenly; "and I still think and am sure that a girl in Annie's position will be quite out of place in such an assembly. She is very good, I am sure, and what people always call 'nice'; but what is the use of treating her to pleasures unbecoming her proper station. She will have to be a governess all her life, I dare say, if she have not the luck to marry a well-to-do tradesman."

"Annie's position may be an inferior one perhaps, Queenie, though I cannot altogether allow that it is so, except in point of actual means; and some of her connections are not quite so desirable as we could wish them to be. Nevertheless, she herself is quite as respectable and quite as well educated—perhaps more so, in some particulars—as any of the fashionable young ladies who will be here on Thursday night. She is perfectly well-bred, too; you cannot deny that. She will not disgrace us in any way, we are sure."

"I dare say not; but, mother, what she will do for a really suitable dress, I cannot think. It will be but a poor kindness to invite her to meet thoroughly well-dressed people, and subject her to the mortification of making but a shabby appearance herself."

"I have thought of that, and I have ordered a pretty and elegant ball-dress for her, which Dolly will beg her to accept as from her."

"Does Dolly know that Annie is to be one of the guests?"

"She knows now; she did not till last evening. It is all settled, Queenie."

"So it appears! Well, if Dolly is well pleased, I shall be well content. As you say, mother, you have a perfect right to invite any one you please to your own house; I only hope Miss Annie Derrington will thoroughly enjoy herself. Is there no other member of the family to be expected?"

"Not as an invited guest. I fancy Mrs. Derrington may ask permission to attend awhile as a spectator. Nurse is very fond of her, you know, and will gladly welcome her to her own especial quarters; it is only natural that Mrs.

Derrington should wish to see both her daughters for once *en grande tenue*."

No more was said, and Chrissie was only too thankful to have got over the interview so satisfactorily. Queenie had made fewer objections and been less pertinacious in opposition than her mother had expected. Dolly was simply delighted to be assured that Annie, who had so few enjoyments, should share her pleasure, and her gratitude to Mrs. Osborne for the simple, yet perfectly tasteful, ball-dress, which was to be presented in her own name, was unbounded. Of course she would privately inform Annie of the source from which the courteous, considerate gift really came.

The old year died out, and the new year was welcomed at "The Acacias" in accordance with the various proclivities of its inmates. Queenie *did* dance the old year out and the new year in as was the custom in the family of her friend, Florence L'Estrange, and, as seemed to them, quite the proper and the natural thing to do. Mr. Osborne and his son Philip, Dolly and Mrs. Fairfax, knelt in silent prayer, as the solemn hour of midnight struck, together with a goodly company of fellow worshippers, in their own beloved church. Among them was old nurse and several of the more serious servants of the Osborne household. Mrs. Osborne joined them in spirit only, in her quiet chamber; for her husband would not hear of her running the risk of the slightest exposure to the night air. Susanna South enlivened her own solitude by writing a private diary, which was to be despatched to her most intimate friend. It was a very curious sort of diary, written in a sort of cipher, and no names, except certain fictitious ones, were introduced throughout. Queenie figured in it largely, but as "Titania." Mrs. Fairfax was "Grimalkin"; the heads of the house were Mr. and Mrs. Goosey Gander. Old Nurse was "Mother Hubbard." Dolly was alternately "Juanita" and the "Princess of Andalusia."

When Miss South had concluded her entries for that day and the day preceding, she calmly read over what she had written, made a few corrections, and, with a significant smile, folded the sheets into a large legal-looking envelope,

addressed to "Madame la Directrice," of the "Order of St. Sapphira." Madame's residence, either private or official, was not superadded, the document was evidently not meant to be committed to the public post.

It would not be amiss, perhaps, to give one or two extracts from this most singular production:—

"*Thursday, December 30.*—The Mother Confessor will be surprised that, failing all promise, no communication of any sort has been forwarded for the last three days. The fact is, that Sister Theresa has been so fully occupied that she has not had a minute actually at her own disposal. Titania has been extremely difficult to please, and very much out of temper; she left for the *réunion* late, after having worried the 'Sister' almost out of her wits, and took with her all her private keys, or else deposited them in some place known only to Mother Hubbard. Sister Theresa had so distracting a headache that she found it quite impossible to record the events of the day; and, indeed, there was nothing worth recording. Madame La Directrice will say that every day *must* have its record, however trifling, and that no entry can be certainly unimportant. It may be so, but the 'Sister' begs to remind her superiors that it is not impossible to overload the most enduring camel, and that the proverbial 'last straw' is supposed to do all the mischief. The 'Sister' begs to be fully trusted, and allowed to move at her own discretion; otherwise, she will be obligated, in self-defence, to place herself under the protection of the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals. The 'Sister' is at this moment suffering excruciating tortures from a sudden attack of neuralgic headache brought on by incessant harass during the day, and by want of necessary rest.

"*Friday, December 31.*—Titania has gone betimes to fairyland, and remains for the night with her friends; she returns to-morrow morning, in time for luncheon. All is very quiet; the house is so still it might be empty—and, indeed, it is not very far from empty at this moment. Mr. Goosey Gander, with Grimalkin and the Princess of Andalusia, have gone to attend the midnight mass. Mother Hubbard, Mrs. Kitchener, and some of the pious underlings are in waiting; they will all return together, not later than a quarter past

twelve. Mrs. Goosey Gander tells her beads in her own oratory ; she never attends evensong at the Cathedral. Her delicate health and Dr. Quackenboss forbid it ; but Mrs. Goosey Gander is intensely devout, and would permit no worldly vanities under her roof, did not Titania bear rule over everything.

"Grimalkin is a person to be dreaded, and her company to be shunned ; she is evidently a most suspicious creature, and has the unfortunate gift of reading countenances, and swoops down suddenly, when she is least expected, at all times and seasons, in places where she can have no possible business. In short, Grimalkin is really an amateur female detective, and keeps a private and secret *Inquiry Office* of her own.

"It is to be hoped that Grimalkin will very speedily return to her own Castle-Grim. Would it not be well that she should receive a *telegram*, judiciously worded, summoning her to come, on the 6th prox., to the defence of her own fortifications ? Juanita, too, is a person who keeps one unceasingly on the alert. What she fears, or what she suspects, it is impossible to guess ! but she certainly has all her wits about her, and knows how to read between the lines, better than anybody yet encountered.

"Of course, the *Sister* ought to have been with the *faithful* at the midnight mass ; but she felt it her duty to remain behind and profit by the opportunities which, under such exceptional circumstances, would probably occur. Even Titania seems to think the Sister's religious profession is not altogether sincere ; but she is far from saintly herself ! The *sapphires* are simply magnificent ! The *pearls* are unsurpassed ; only an expert could determine which were the more valuable—the sapphires, *or* the pearls. I advise that they should never be separated. The 'Sister' is again suffering from excruciating neuralgic pains, which excused her from assisting at the midnight service with the Goosey Gander faction ; and must also excuse her from any further private communication with Madame la Directrice."

Susanna, having sealed her mysterious packet, and consigned it to the recesses of the most secret of secret pockets—of which she wore several—locked up her desk,

and went out on to the corridor evidently to reconnoitre. All was very still ; but there was a distant sound of hymn-singing from the far-away kitchens. The gas was turned very low, upstairs and downstairs, the wind moaned eerily through the great wide house, and rustled the bare branches of the forest trees without, on the lonely, desolate common. Miss South returned to her mistress's room, and, having secured all the doors, devoted herself to a most painstaking examination of that young lady's drawers, desk, dressing-cases, &c. She had either discovered the whereabouts of Titania's keys, or she had possessed herself of duplicates, which served her purpose most effectually—for she unlocked, and locked again, after careful inspection, every casket, wardrobe, and box that the room contained. The pearls were absent, for Susanna had herself arrayed Titania in them for the grand ball which she was at that moment attending.

But the sapphires which Miss South had seen, but never touched with her own hands, were securely hidden in the mysterious recesses of the heavy cabinet, which was a fixture belonging to the room itself. And not one of her curious little bunch of artistic keys was of the slightest use when she essayed to explore the contents of this baffling, mysterious piece of oaken furniture. She gave it up in despair, after having vainly tried to discover the secret of the wonderful cabinet, for *secret* it had, she felt convinced. She pressed every knob, touched every piece of ornamentation, passed her dexterous fingers over every niche of elaborate scroll-work, but without success ; and she was at last reluctantly compelled to feel assured that the cabinet doors opened with a patent key, and that no secret spring was anywhere to be disclosed on the outer surface.

And then there were sounds of life once more in the long-deserted mansion. Dolly ran upstairs, humming the refrain of a hymn she had been singing in the church ; servants bustled about, the gas was fully turned on again, and the broad corridor and the great staircase were flooded with dazzling light. Mr. Osborne's voice was heard all over the house as he went about wishing everybody a "Happy New Year."

Five minutes later, just as Miss South had decided that she really was sleepy, and might as well take advantage of being off duty, and go to bed for as much of the night as remained, nurse entered the room. She found the ladies' maid deeply engrossed with a pious book—a volume of sermons, apparently; but nurse could not be certain, as her sight had failed her very much of late.

"What, not in bed yet, Susan?" cried "Mother Hubbard." "Wouldn't you like a little mulled elder wine? Master has given out quite a handsome supply, and it's being hotted up in the servants' hall, this very minute. You had better come down."

"No, thank you, nurse," returned Miss South, meekly; "my head is easier suddenly, and I think I had better go to bed while I can sleep—the fit will come on again before morning, I am afraid. Had you a good *prayer-meeting*?"

"A very good one; for all it is such a bitter cold night; the singing was beautiful, and the pastor said a few words on the 90th Psalm that came very close home to one, especially to an old woman like me, that can't expect to see many New Year's mornings."

"Ah! we never know," responded Susanna, with a dolorous shake of her head; "we are here to-day and gone to-morrow! The solemn call may come to us, young or old, at any minute; for—in *the midst of life we are in death*! I'll wish you good night, nurse, and a 'Happy New Year,' and may the close of it find us all on the way to heaven! Good night! I can hardly keep my eyes open."

"Now," said "Mother Hubbard" to herself, as she shut her own room door half an hour afterwards, "now, I wonder why it is that I can't believe in that girl's goodness! I do wish I had never read the book called *The Female Jesuit*. I've been horribly suspicious ever since! The older I grow the more uncharitable I get, I do declare. Deary me, I'll fight against it through the coming year, God helping me. It doesn't become a Christian to have such ungenerous thoughts. All the same, I do wish, to my heart, I had never read that *Female Jesuit*."

CHAPTER XVIII.

AN UNEXPECTED GUEST.

THE first days of the new-born year passed rapidly away, and the eventful "*sixth*" speedily arrived. Mr. Osborne shut himself up in the room dedicated to his sole occupation, and commonly known throughout the family as "daddy's den." But if he flattered himself that the busy world was finally excluded when he turned the key in the study-door he was woefully mistaken, for every minute—or, perhaps, to speak more accurately, every three minutes—some one came humbly begging or clamorously demanding admittance. Now the workmen wanted orders, which no one but "the master" could give; now the gardeners wished for directions as to how many stove-plants were to be removed; now it had to be urged that the library should be utilised as a second tea-room; and now it was requested that Mr. Osborne, who had played the butler during many hours of the previous day, should once more descend to the well-replenished cellar.

"I shall have a nice little bill at the wine merchant's!" he said, ruefully, as he put on his overcoat again, and descended to the nethermost regions. "Queenie, I would give a hundred pounds this moment to be out of it all; and I am afraid it is nothing less than downright wickedness to waste such lots of money on mere useless pleasure. Champagne and Moselle are all very well in moderation, but here are dozens and dozens going to be flung away! Might as well empty them into yonder pool on the common."

"I assure you, father, it will every drop be wanted—these light sparkling wines will be called for *ad libitum*; and we cannot possibly have too much Burgundy and claret."

"What thirsty souls your friends must be! I shall have

to present the leading hospitals with a hundred dozen of good sound port, that I may not have the sin of pampering the rich and neglecting the poor on my conscience. And mind you don't let 'mother' knock herself up for your enjoyment. She's not by any means well, and ought to be quiet, and this sort of thing worries her as it does me, for we are neither of us used to such a racket and turning of the place upside-down. This is your first grand entertainment, or *Ball*, or whatever you call it ; I say it is a 'Rout !' But it will be your last, I promise you, as long, at least, as you are in your father's house."

"Well, father," said Queenie, soothingly, offering her pretty rose-bud lips to the paternal moustache, "I do not think I shall ask for another yet awhile—perhaps *never* ! I had no idea what a dreadful upsetting it would make—I am almost tired of it before it begins. Still, I do trust it will all go off well ! You will be very nice to the people, won't you, now ? Don't be cross to your little girl, there's a dear old darling !"

And then there were more caresses, a kiss on the forehead and on both cheeks ; the white, round arms were folded lovingly about the brawny shoulders, and the substantial form was fairly hugged on the very bottomest step of the cellar stairs ; for Queenie, in her anxiety, had descended thither herself, in order to be quite sure how many cases were to be unpacked.

"Well, well !" he said, gruffly, "I suppose I must make the best of it for this once ; don't tire yourself, my little one, this rough place is not fit for you. Take care of yourself for the evening. Since there must be a ball nothing ought to hinder you from being the Queen of it !" And perfectly restored to equanimity the good man went to work among the cases with the best will imaginable.

Dolly had insisted on Mrs. Osborne keeping her own room, which she would not allow any one to invade on any pretence. Of course she could not shut out Queenie, who was not to be controlled by any one ; but she persuaded her that "poor dear mother *must* be undisturbed, or she would not be able to receive her guests at the proper hour !" To atone for this exclusion Dolly made herself doubly and

trebly useful, and she had pressed Mrs. Derrington, who was a host in herself, and quite willing to help cook, or hired waiter, or decorator, into the general service.

Queenie was quite gracious to Mrs. Derrington. She had not the slightest objection to her "making herself useful" all over the house; and if she liked to hover about the outskirts of the ball-room and supper-room in the evening, in company with nurse and Susanna, and the other upper-servants, there was no reason in the world why she should not enjoy the revel. The servants were always allowed to be distant spectators on such occasions, as Queenie very well knew. And Queenie, when not at all out of temper, or "put about," as the maids phrased it, could be angelically amiable and so "good-natured" that all her little court of humble admirers fell down and worshipped her, and loudly expressed their unfeigned appreciation.

All was quite ready, and only the hired *artistes* had to put those finishing touches which it needs a skilled hand to bestow, when the lighting-up at last began. One glance at the general effect was all that Queenie vouchsafed; in spite of having spared herself, as much as was possible since morning, she was getting very tired, and felt the need of several hours of perfect rest. Annie Derrington had just arrived, and she would dress with Dolly in her room, under the supervision of her stepmother.

Florence and Adelaide had been in the house since luncheon-time, and they, too, were to make their toilets at "The Acacias," Florence's own maid having arrived for the purpose of presiding at the dressing of them both. Of course Miss South had no idea of attending to any one besides her mistress—on such an occasion Miss Osborne would need her undivided energies, all her artistic tastes, the fullest development of her genius, her everything! But it saddened her faithful soul as she reflected how often she had dressed the lovely, sainted Lady Selina Severn for a Royal Ball, or for Her Majesty's Drawing-room. Mrs. Barrington, too, had gone from her hands, a perfect miracle of grace and splendour, although, poor dear lady, she had long passed the first bloom of her youth! But Miss

Osborne must be *faultlessly* attired ; she must appear as the Empress and Queen of the festival !

Nurse humbly begged to be allowed to assist at her darling young lady's toilet, and Susanna graciously gave her consent. Mrs. Nurse would be useful just to present things, and have hair-pins ready, and even to hold a needle and thread by her should, through any accident, a stitch be needed. Susanna South had had so much experience, and she *had* known a stitch called for when least expected, and at the last minute, too.

"Besides, it will please the dear old lady," quoth Susanna, as she shook out the silvery transparent robe, and its rich underskirt of lustrous snowy satin, and laid it in readiness on the bed. "But I do hope she will not really interfere, Madame ; I feel that my reputation rests on my perfect success, as an *artiste*, to-night, and I am naturally nervous at such a crisis of my life ! Mrs. Nurse will be actually useful, if she will only be content to do what I bid her ; but I cannot let her place a jewel, or a flower ! I *must* put every finishing touch myself, especially those sapphires. Ah ! my dear lost lady, the sainted Selina, had no gems to equal those. She was the daughter of a peer of the realm, of course ; she was my 'Lady Selina,' in her own right ; but the Earl was not a wealthy nobleman ; he was poor, indeed, taking into consideration his high rank and his noble family."

All was at length complete ; among the very earliest arrivals was a certain Count Adolphe Friedrich Stanger, to whom Queenie had been introduced some few weeks before, and whom she had insisted on numbering among the guests. The Count was already in the room, and doing his *possible* to ingratiate himself with Mrs. Osborne, when Queenie and Dolly entered. He fell back modestly, apparently overcome by the sight of so much dazzling beauty.

Queenie was resplendent ; and she knew that Susanna had excelled herself ; she had never looked nearly so well, or imagined that she could look so well, in all her life before, and Miss Osborne was by no means a young lady disposed to depreciate her own attractions. She did, un-

doubtedly, look very lovely in her silvery gossamer dress, with the rich satin shimmering under its ample sweeping folds. The overskirt was gathered up with water-lilies, arranged after a design which had occurred at the eleventh hour to Miss Susanna South ; only, as she modestly explained, she had really taken the idea from a Court dress, in which the lamented and beloved Lady Selina had made her appearance at Buckingham Palace. And though the dear sainted Lady Selina was no doubt extremely beautiful, she was not to be compared with Miss Regina Osborne, on the evening of her birthday ball ! The sapphires, too, were magnificent, and glowed and sparkled on the ivory skin, and among the flowing tresses of the luxuriant, shining hair ; they matched, too, or so it seemed, the lovely violet-hued eyes of the smiling wearer. Mr. Osborne thought he had never imagined a daughter of his could be half so beautiful ; he had never even fancied that she would turn out to be so perfectly lovely a creature. He almost pitied fathers he knew, some of whom were present, who had not daughters who could attempt to vie with his own radiant Queenie.

Now, the question of first partners had not been an easy one to settle, at least so far as regarded Queenie. She and Dolly, as queens of the night, were to open the ball together. Dolly had had no trouble ; for Philip, as the only unmarried son of the house, had at once put in his claim, and the two were paired without hesitation. But Queenie's affairs were not so easily managed, and the first line on her programme remained blank, till the very morning of the eventful day.

And yet it was only a blank in seeming ; for Miss Osborne had really promised the irresistible Count Stanger, but dared not openly inscribe his name on her new mother-of-pearl tablets. The fact was—though nobody at all guessed it, or even dreamed it, save Dolly, who had had a private word with her friend—Felicia Regina Osborne had *fallen in love* with Count Adolphe Friedrich Stanger, and was quite ready to announce herself to her friends, as the betrothed of this handsome courtly youth, who had privately declared himself her humble admirer, and most devoted lover, ready to *die* for her beloved sake !

And yet the gallant Count hesitated when Queenie proposed mentioning the little incident to her father; there were reasons—family reasons—why the secret must not be disclosed at present. He could not, dared not, demand his matchless bride of her parents *just yet!* he could not exactly explain; his sweet Queenie must trust her adoring Alphonse for a very little while; and to open the ball together, as had at first been concerted between them, would be simply to avow their betrothal to the world. So, after all, poor Queenie had to be content with a certain Mr. Howard, the friend of her brother James, and of undeniable respectability and good position; and also—so whispered Queenie to her confidantes, Adelaide and Florence—“undeniably heavy and stupid.” And then Miss Harcourt, who had been rather struck with the Count herself, and been very much disgusted at his evident preference for Regina, unkindly replied, “My dear, it is the very best arrangement that could be made, I am sure; so very thoughtful of your eldest brother to concern himself about your partners; mine would not care if I danced with the baker’s man, or the family grocer! No; it would never have done to take the Count; nobody in the world actually knows him, or who he is, or where his estates are, or whether his pockets are empty or full. While all your world, at least, knows all about Mr. Frank Howard; and Mr. James and Mr. John Osborne are so fond of him, and are intimate with the whole family. Don’t grumble, darling; Frank is not so handsome as the Count—if he really be a Count!—I grant; but then he is a thousand times safer. It is so unwise to compromise oneself, for the sake of a person who may, after all, be nothing better than an adventurer.”

Queenie had more than half a mind to quarrel with Adelaide on the spot; but she thought better of it, and dissembled; she did not want her friend to know how very much she really and truly cared—or believed she cared—for this probable “adventurer.” But if she could not allow herself to be engaged for the first dance, she might do as she liked about those that followed; and her Alphonse’s name actually occurred a good many times, when she came

to read over her programme ; and it was down for the supper-dances, too ; but she almost quaked as she reflected what her father and her brothers—especially her two elder brothers—would say, if they perceived her tactics.

The band struck up ; Mr. Frank Howard, looking as dull and gentlemanly as possible, and without much expression on his plain, honest face, led out the beautiful Miss Osborne. Philip and Dolly were their *vis-à-vis* in the opening quadrille ; Queenie not being entirely occupied with her partner, was almost startled to see how very handsome Dolly was, and with what undisguised admiration Philip regarded her. Dolly's dress was a contrast to Queenie's, it was of a newly-introduced material, black and transparent, and elegantly embroidered in gold ; her flowers were deep crimson roses, her ornaments were of plain dead gold, and though not plentiful, were handsome and singularly effective. They were a birthday present from Mrs. Osborne and her two eldest sons, who always regarded and treated Dolly with all reverence and respect, and with the affection due to a sister. It struck Queenie that Philip might possibly conceive something more than a brotherly affection for his dark-eyed partner, and she was not certain that she could cordially approve of the projected alliance, if such, indeed, it should turn out to be.

The rooms were soon thronged ; the music resounded ; the " Mabel " waltzes, then in the height of popularity, were being played, when Mr. Osborne suddenly disappeared from the room accompanied by his wife. They had evidently been summoned to greet some fresh arrival ; but who could it be ? All the others had been duly received by the host and hostess, at the entrance of the extemporised ball-room ; the new-comer was certainly a personage of importance ! Something like a procession was slowly making its way through the conservatory, which opened into the tent, the curtains of which were thrown well back. Queenie and the Count were still spinning round and round the open space, the cynosure of all eyes, when the band came to a full stop. It must be confessed that these two young people were about the handsomest couple present.

Everybody turned towards the conservatory, where there was quite a little commotion, and in the midst of the throng appeared a curiously contrived chair, borne by four tall footmen in livery—something like an old-fashioned sedan-chair, but with its back thrown wide open like that of a fashionable landau. Mr. Osborne walked on one side of this peculiar litter or palanquin, for it was difficult to know by what name to designate it ; and Mrs. Osborne on the other. Mrs. Fairfax, who had been standing up to watch the flying waltzers, sat down suddenly, as if shot, and exclaimed in sheer astonishment, and not quite under her breath—“ Bless me ! I do believe it’s old Aunt Jemima ! ”

And “ Aunt Jemima ” — otherwise Mrs. Marmaduke Merridew—it actually was. She, who had been paralysed, or supposed to be paralysed, for years ; who had not left her own house, and scarcely her own suite of rooms, for no one knew how long, had actually arrived at “ The Acacias ” as Queenie’s visitor ! She had received a formal invitation, as a matter of course ; “ Aunt Jemima ” was always invited when any grand entertainment was to be given in the family, though it was quite understood to be a mere ceremony, not to be dispensed with so long as the old lady lived and retained her faculties. Her secretary and companion, a formidable-looking spinster, herself well stricken in years, always in due course acknowledged these polite attentions :—“ Mrs. Marmaduke Merridew presents her compliments, &c., &c., but feels obliged to decline the honour,” &c.

On this memorable occasion, however, Miss Stalker’s reply had been rather differently worded :—“ Mrs. Marmaduke Merridew’s compliments, and she hopes to be present on the evening in question.” Still, no one at all expected Aunt Jemima ; it was just a freak of hers, Mrs. Osborne decided ; she was given to freaks, and probably was not quite herself ; and Miss Stalker had always promptly to obey commands. So nothing was said to Queenie or to Dolly ; only Mrs. Fairfax saw the note, and agreed with her brother and sister that the old lady was seized with a sudden whim, which she could not possibly carry into action. “ She will forget all about it long before the

sixth," said Jonathan Osborne, as he tucked the billet into his waistcoat pocket, and thought no more about it.

But to what lengths Aunt Jemima could really go, what marvellous feats she could achieve, no one—not even the white nigger, popularly known as Miss Stalker—had any idea. The *palanquin* had been called into request once or twice before; but no one in the least imagined that it would ever be wanted again. However, here it was, antiquated and gorgeous, and rather cumbrous; and here was Mrs. Merridew, and here, too, was the redoubtable Miss Stalker.

The music ceased, and there was almost a dead silence in the room; every one who was not in the foremost ranks pushed forward to behold the extraordinary spectacle. And as they looked, the bearers withdrew and disappeared. The "*palanquin*," as we may call it for the lack of a more correct term—only it was *not* a palanquin, nor a litter, nor a chair—was put down in the very centre of the brilliantly-lighted ball-room, and still in attendance were Mr. and Mrs. Osborne, Miss Stalker, and an elderly gentleman of subdued aspect, who was evidently there in some capacity which no one could quite understand. It transpired, however, that this enigmatical personage, who never opened his lips nor raised his eyes, was Mrs. Merridew's specially retained medical adviser.

The guests looked on, amazed. They saw, seated in the "*palanquin*," a very little old woman, gorgeously attired in black velvet and ermine, and loosely wrapped in one or more priceless Indian cashmeres. Her skin was like ancient parchment, tightly strained over her sharp, bird-like features. Her eyes, which must once have been fine, were now dim and lustreless, though a strange fire gleamed even yet in their dark, dull depths. Her figure, whatever it had been, had altogether collapsed, and she sat, or lay—it was difficult to say which—a mere huddled heap of richly attired humanity.

Was a *tableau vivant* going to be performed?

Some people thought it was only a diversion for the amusement of the guests, as they waited for what should next befall. But the curious creature raised her yellow,

claw-like hands, which were glittering with gems, and spoke in a shrill falsetto voice:—"I am very glad to meet you here, to-night, ladies and gentlemen. I am here in honour of the birthday of Miss Felicia Regina Dorothea Osborne, my great-great-great-niece, or five-and-twentieth cousin four times removed, or something of the sort! I was told she was a wonderful beauty; and I wanted to be assured with my own eyes that report did not exaggerate! And I am satisfied, ladies and gentlemen. She is 'all my fancy painted her,' and a great deal more besides. I would have been her godmother, only her people don't believe in sponsors—more fools they—when there's plenty of hard cash going! You see, girls don't abound in our family: boys are a drug! When a girl is born into the world, we make a fuss of her. So I mean to leave Felicia Regina Dorothea Osborne my sole heiress, providing she keeps clever and beautiful as long as I live, and never does anything, great or small, to offend *me*, or to put me out of humour."

No one spoke, but there was a suppressed murmur of what was evidently meant for approbation throughout the room. Both Mr. and Mrs. Osborne looked slightly annoyed. Miss Stalker and the attendant physician were motionless as lay figures—nor so much as moved an eyelid. Mrs. Merridew continued:—"I daresay, ladies and gentlemen, you think I am a very queer, old woman, not quite in my proper senses—a little 'off my head,' as people say. But I beg to remark, I am in the full possession of all my senses; and when all is said and done, I am not so terribly old! I daresay most of you take me for a hundred, and perhaps a little over; but I would have you to know"—here her voice rose higher and shriller—"I am only a little over ninety! and what's that? There was a man once—I forget his name, but you'll find it in the Bible—and he lived to be nine hundred and sixty-nine! And I believe it, for I am not an infidel. Come and kiss me, Felicia Regina Dorothea!"

Thus commanded, Queenie, with blanched face and beating heart, stepped forward and saluted the unearthly countenance of her, "twenty-fifth cousin, four times removed!" But she almost shuddered, as her warm, rosy

mouth touched the sunken, yellow cheek, and she felt very much as if she were embracing an animated corpse—a visitant from another world—a ghost from Hades!

Then Aunt Jemima desired Miss Stalker to make a "*reverence*" in her name, and on her account; while she herself said, "I beg leave to say adieu, ladies and gentlemen, and I am very happy to have been allowed the honour of meeting you all, and making my felicitations. I must request the privilege of a few minutes' private conversation with Felicia Regina and her parents before I quit this house. May I beg you all to excuse me and them?"

Miss Stalker raised a whistle—a common dog-whistle—to her lips, and at the signal the bearers, that is to say the four tall footmen, reappeared, took up the wondrous palanquin and bore it in the direction indicated. In a room near at hand, led by Mrs. Osborne, they halted, and once more retired, while refreshments were administered to the *dame de compagnie* and the physician. Aunt Jemima declined any of the proffered delicacies, but she put her withered lips to a full glass of champagne, and courteously pledged her cousins of every degree.

"Now I am ready," she said, as Mrs. Osborne took the crystal cup from her trembling fingers; "I am quite ready! I was never in this house before, and I dare say I shall never enter it again! But don't look for your wealth too soon, Felicia Regina Dorothea, I am not going to die yet! And mind! you must not offend me; you must never do anything of which I in the least disapprove; or, dread the consequences! My hands are not paralysed, though my lower extremities are; and I can sign another *will* any day, or every day, if I like to do it. By the way who was that young fellow you were turning round with when I came in? you were just a pair of tee-totums!"

"The gentleman I was waltzing with?" inquired Queenie, falteringly, as if she did not quite understand.

"Yes! that handsome young fellow with the straight nose, and the eyes that are never still; a youth, *I* should say, who never paid his bills, and knew more than is desirable about *post obits* and I.O.U.'s."

About which specialities Queenie was, of course, pro-

foundly ignorant, but she understood the reference to the classic nose ; so she replied, " His name is Count Adolphe Stanger—he is a foreigner."

" Yes ; I should suppose he was a foreigner ! But though he calls himself a ' Count,' it does not follow that he is one. But I can tell you what he is, and I am not often mistaken ; I can read countenances. He is a past master in the sublime science of cheating. He is a rascal and a *liar* ! Mind what you are about, Jonathan Osborne ! and keep your hearth and home free of swindlers. Take care of your lovely daughter ; the Helens and the Cleopatras of the world always want keen looking after. Good night ! "

And once more the procession started, and was quickly on its way. Aunt Jemima was gone. Queenie was uncertain whether she had remarked her own splendid gift of ten years ago or not ; but the sapphires shimmered and sparkled, or shone like deep blue lakes in the moonlight as, leaning on the arm of Count Adolphe Friedrich Stanger, she passed into the supper-room. But Miss Osborne did not enjoy her supper, and the after-supper dance was a complete failure.



CHAPTER XIX.

THE DAY AFTER THE BALL.

LIKE all passages in this life—ordinary or extraordinary—the ball at " The Acacias " came to an end. Queenie could scarcely make up her mind as to whether the grand event was really worth all the cost and trouble which had been lavished upon it. Everybody declared that the birth-day ball had been an immense success, and that nothing so brilliant had been on record within the memory

of any save the oldest inhabitants of Clapham, who had known the place in the former days of its state and glory ; when persons of high rank and distinction had their residence round and about the leafy, lonely precincts of the Common.

The ball was over, and Mr. and Mrs. Osborne fervently rejoiced that they could rest from their anxious labours, and give themselves to repose ; the tremendous disturbance which had, as it were, convulsed the usually well-ordered household, would gradually subside ; the army of workmen, decorators, hired waiters, and their congeners seemed quite inclined to make short work of clearing away all outward traces of the memorable entertainment ; the temporary ball-room, which had taken almost a full week to erect, construct, arrange, and beautify, was demolished within the space of a few hours ; the conservatories, somewhat the worse for the raid made upon them, were restored to order. Gunter's people cleared away with a will ; and Mr. Osborne himself, thankfully turning the key in the outside door of his half-emptied cellar, deferred the ceremony of "stocktaking," which was inevitable, to a distant and more convenient period.

It was late in the afternoon when the family, after short repose, assembled in the dining-room at a nondescript meal of the most composite description. Mr. Osborne and Philip, who had stayed at home to make himself generally useful, were lunching on boned-turkey and Strasburg ham ; Mrs. Osborne was refreshing herself with tea and toast ; Queenie and Florence L'Estrange, the only one of the guests who remained in the house, were devouring waffles and vanilla ices ; while Dolly, and Annie, who had stopped to help her sister in doing her best to restore things to order, were solacing themselves with coffee, and the residue of a half-consumed fat capon.

Mrs. Fairfax was not of the party—she had retired from the festive throng soon after the departure of Aunt Jemima, and had consequently enjoyed a very fair night's rest. She was, therefore, quite ready to bustle about at a comparatively early hour, and had been making herself generally useful in "restoring order" ever since nine o'clock. She had break-

fasted as soon as breakfast could be procured in the disorganised household ; she had dined at mid-day on the plentiful *débris* of last night's supper, and she was too busy, as yet, to require afternoon tea.

All were talking volubly ; and Queenie, who had pronounced herself "quite too seedy" to show herself in the family circle, was beginning to revive, and could somewhat enjoy the memories of the preceding evening. She had prevailed upon her friend Florence to spend the next few days with her, averring that, now all was over, she felt quite too low-spirited to be left alone, and Dolly was altogether taken up with her mother, and receiving the confidences of her sister Annie, who had promised to stay at "The Acacias" till the family could settle down again to its wonted tranquillity.

Chrissie was languidly stirring her tea, for in spite of all the aid she had received from various quarters she was desperately tired. She said little, but listened to the pleasant chat of the two Derrington girls, who were seated near her sofa. Philip occupied himself very much in waiting on the young ladies ; and the respectful attention which he paid to Dolly awakened certain ideas in his mother's breast, and she, like Queenie, scarcely knew whether she approved or not, of the discovery she believed she had made.

Mr. Osborne, busily occupied with his boned turkey, kept silence, though Annie could perceive that he heard every word of the gay talk that passed between his daughter and Miss L'Estrange. At length he pushed away his plate, finished his glass of Burgundy, and seemed not disinclined to mingle in the conversation that was going on at his end of the room. Florence and Queenie were discussing the events of the wonderful evening, and, absorbed in the subject, had not noticed that Mr. Osborne was quite ready to join in the discourse.

They were speaking of "Aunt Jemima," and Queenie was explaining to her friend the very distant relationship that existed between them.

"She is certainly a very peculiar person," said Florence—"a woman of a thousand-and-one caprices, I should say ;

still, my dear, she gave you those lovely sapphires, which, I dare say, are a little fortune in themselves, and as she all but declared you her heiress in the presence of your friends, I am sure it is quite worth while to study all her little whims, and make yourself excessively agreeable. I would willingly be her slave, if only she would select me as the recipient of her wealth. She must be extremely rich, and she cannot last very long, I am convinced. Why, she owns to being over ninety !”

“That is old enough, in all conscience ; but mother has reason to believe she has actually seen her hundredth birthday. If one gets over fourscore, I fancy one may live to any age. As the Count said, one gets into the habitude of living, and the wonder is that such a person *ever* dies.”

“I wonder what people live for to such an extreme old age. Nobody wants them, and they can want nobody. I suppose your great-great-great-aunt keeps quite a little Court about her ? She is evidently accustomed to be obeyed, and knows how to hold her own. She knows how to command ; one would think she was born a royal princess. I can fancy that Queen Elizabeth would have been just such an autocrat had she lived but a quarter of a century longer.”

“A mercy she did not. Autocrats are always tyrants. If ‘Aunt Jemima’ survives much longer and keeps her senses—which, by the way, seem to be preternaturally acute, and I have to be on my good behaviour all the while—it will be rather more than I can stand. I have always gone my own way, and I always shall, Flo—heiress or no heiress. I could not, for the sake of a few paltry thousands, shape my life, that is all before me, to please the absurd fancies of an old-world, behind-the-age, venerable fossil like ‘Aunt Jemima,’ who indulges in all sorts of ridiculous, irrational likes and dislikes.”

Queenie spoke rather loudly, for she was getting excited, and forgot that her father was probably listening to every word she uttered.

Florence, in a lower voice, remarked, “She did not take to the *Count*, that is evident, though he is handsome enough—or so some people think—for an Apollo Belvedere.

She does not approve of foreigners, I dare say. Such antiquated specimens of humanity very seldom do, and nothing can give them confidence in foreign titles."

"Foreign noblemen ought certainly to bring their testimonials with them to this country," responded Miss L'Estrange, in a still lower tone; but *sotto voce* as was her remark, it was very distinctly heard by all in the room, there happening to be a lull in the conversation precisely at that very moment.

The short silence which ensued was broken by Mr. Osborne, who quietly inquired of his daughter—"Queenie, who is this Count Stanger?"

"Really, father, I cannot exactly tell you," replied Miss Osborne; "he is Count Adolphe Friedrich Stanger, of some unpronounceable place in Germany—or is it in Hungary, Flo?—I am so stupid at remembering proper names."

"It is somewhere in Karpathia, if I do not err, Queenie," answered Florence; "his eldest brother is a Baron—or something; his father takes the rank of *Prince* in Karpathia; but his wealthiest estates are in Transylvania."

"May I ask how you came by your information, Miss L'Estrange?"

"In the simplest way possible, Mr. Osborne. Several of our friends were asking who this very handsome and distinguished young man was; and as I really knew very little beyond his name, I had the effrontery to question him. He at once, with the utmost candour, and with all courtesy, in no way resenting my impertinence, told me all about himself. He did not even conceal the fact that he is the second son, though he is, in all probability, the heir; as his brother, the Baron, is a cripple and an invalid, and the physicians say he cannot survive more than a few years."

"Indeed! And what guarantee have you of Count Stanger's veracity? Who else has spoken to you of his estates in Karpathia and Transylvania? What further do you know of the gentleman—if gentleman he be—beyond the account of himself and his family with which he has favoured you?"

"I have his own word; and surely that is sufficient. A

gentleman—not to say a *nobleman*—always speaks the exactest truth.”

“I suppose so—at least, that is the commonly received impression. But before you can implicitly trust a person’s honour, you ought to be sure that he really is the honourable person he claims to be. I should very much like to know who introduced you to this Count Adolphe Stanger. And how long have you known him?”

“I have known him for months. I met him first at the *table d’hôte* at the hotel at Buxton; I went there with my Aunt Louisa—who suffers so much from rheumatism, you know!—and she was perfectly satisfied with the Count’s representations. She admired him exceedingly; and, indeed, when they came to talk together, they at once discovered that they had many mutual friends. Aunt Louisa found out that his mother—the Princess Kalitsky—is actually first cousin to her most intimate friend, the Countess Behrenstadt. Of course, that settled everything; people cannot well go about with their credentials in their pockets; but, of course, everybody in society knows everybody; if Aunt did not know the Count himself, or the Princess, his mother, you see she knows all about the Countess Behrenstadt, his near relative.”

“Do your aunt and this Countess correspond?”

“I imagine so—oh, yes, certainly! But poor Aunt Louisa is not a good correspondent, unfortunately. Buxton did not suit her so well as we had expected, and her rheumatism has been worse than ever this winter; her fingers are so cruelly distorted that she really cannot write a decent letter. I sometimes write one for her; and, indeed, I wrote one at her dictation only this summer to her very dear friend the Countess Behrenstadt.”

“And was Count Stanger—the lady’s cousin—mentioned?”

“No; for the very excellent reason that we had never heard of such a person; the letter in question was written a full month before we went to Buxton. Now, surely, Mr. Osborne, you are satisfied?”

“I am perfectly satisfied, my dear Miss L’Estrange, that your Aunt’s friend is a lady of position, and entirely worthy

of repute ; but I am afraid you will set me down as a very unpleasant and suspicious mortal when I say that there is nothing in the world to prove that the Princess really is the Countess's relation, or that the young man himself actually is the son of the high-born lady whom he claims as his mother."

"Father!" interposed Queenie, her violet-coloured eyes sparkling with anger, "I must say you are most unjust towards a gentleman who does not happen to be of British birth. As Florence says, all the world cannot go about with their pockets filled with credentials, like servants, who must produce their character from their last situation."

"My dear, I know enough of the world to be sure that persons of repute do generally bring with them letters of introduction, about which there cannot possibly be any mistake. And these supply the place of necessary credentials, references, and so forth. As to servants' characters, they are not difficult to *forg*e. It behoves us always to be quite sure that the domestics whom we receive into our houses are really and truly the persons we suppose them to be."

"*Father!* How can you? Why there would be an end of all faith and trust if everybody required the actual proof of everybody's identity! I should be awfully sorry to have to regard all mankind—unless I knew all about them and theirs indisputably—as my natural enemies, and leagued together to injure and to cheat me. Of course, Count Stanger's name nowhere appears in *Burke's Peerage*; so if you look for it there you will not find it."

"I am not quite so foolish as to look for what I cannot expect to find. A foreign nobleman's name, unless connected by blood or marriage with the British aristocracy, is not at all likely to appear in *Burke*; but there is a volume known as the *Almanach de Gotha*, in which all persons entitled to bear a coat of arms—certainly all personages of rank, as Princes, Dukes, Barons, and Counts—are enumerated. Count Stanger's name will probably appear in the list."

"The '*Almanach Gotha*,' or '*de Gotha*,' whichever it is! I had no idea we had a copy of it in the house, father."

"Nor had we till a day or two ago, When you were talking about this Count so pleasantly, and speaking of him as an unmistakable member of the aristocracy, I thought it might be well to know something about him, so I desired Philip to buy me this *Almanach de Gotha*, which, I am assured, will at once set all vexed questions at rest. The book is now in my study. Run, Dolly, and fetch it, will you? You will find it on the same shelf as the 'Peerage' and 'Baronetage.'"

Nothing was said while Dolly was absent from the room. In a few seconds she returned; the book was precisely where she had been bidden to look for it. Mr. Osborne placed it in his daughter's hands, saying as he did so, "I have sought for the Count's name, Queenie, and sought most carefully and painstakingly, but without success. You know something of German, and more of French, than I can pretend to, so I leave it to you, my dear, triumphantly to vindicate your friend's unassailable honour."

"And I decline, altogether decline, the task, father," responded Queenie, sulkily. "I am perfectly willing to accept the Count on his own simple word, and without what you are pleased to quote—as *proofs*."

"Very well, my dear, so be it. Perhaps Miss L'Estrange will be kind enough to examine the volume on my account. I am a sad, cantankerous old fellow, I know, Miss Florence—quite a curmudgeon; a narrow-minded, prejudiced, ignorant John Bull, who believes in nothing that is not essentially British; but as you doubtless know all about this book, which, I am told, is perfectly reliable, and yet excludes no names or titles that have a right to be enumerated, it will be quite as well if you will undertake to do what Queenie will not, and look through the pages of this redoubtable *Almanach de Gotha* for yourself."

Nothing loth, Florence accepted the challenge, and turned rapidly over the leaves, finding very speedily the entry, in its proper place, and with due style and title, of the Countess Bertha Behrenstadt, widow of the late Count Albert Behrenstadt of Behrensdorf, and aunt, by marriage, of the present Count Wilhelm Behrenstadt.

"There!" cried Florence, with some elation, "there is

confirmation of what I say ; there is a real Countess Behrenstadt, and she is just what she has always represented herself to be. Why, Aunt Louisa and she were friends when they were both unmarried—mere girls—there can be no possible doubt.”

“Of this Countess’s identity? No ; certainly not. The Countess is the Countess ; your aunt’s long intimacy with her would be quite sufficient proof, even were her name not recorded in the *Almanach de Gotha*. But now, will you not prosecute your researches a little further, and find the name of the Princess, who is said to be the Countess’s first cousin, and the mother of Mr. Adolphe Friedrich Stanger?”

“At least call him what society calls him,” said Queenie, with huge disdain. “Give him his proper rank—his true cognomen—till rank and title be alike disproved.”

“Very well, my dear, I will. But had you not better help Florence in her search? She does not light upon Princess Somebody’s name with half the facility with which she found the Countess’s.”

But Queenie still coldly declined ; it was quite too bad of her father, thus to take sides against her in the presence of so many people. She felt it to be quite a humiliation ; she was only most intensely thankful that Adelaide Harcourt did not make one of the company, for Adelaide had suddenly changed her tone, and dared to doubt the honour of the Count.

So Florence, unassisted, plodded through page after page of the bulky volume, but without the least success. She was obliged, at last, to shut the book, and confess herself baffled in her eager search. As she laid the *Almanach de Gotha* before Mr. Osborne, she said gravely, “No ; I cannot find it ; I fail to discover any Count Stanger, nor is any Prince Kalitsky, or Galitsky, so much as mentioned ; only my aunt’s old friend, the Countess Bertha, is beyond dispute a genuine personage, and fully owned as such, by her own nobility.”

“My dear young lady, pray understand me—that I am thoroughly convinced of the truth of every word *you* have uttered ; the Countess Bertha is undeniably the Countess Bertha—a woman of rank and family ; but I find in this

book, which I take to be the equivalent of our *British Peerage*, no mention of any Count Adolphe Stanger, the son of a prince and princess, and the acknowledged cousin, once removed, of the august lady in question. I should strongly advise you to write yourself to the Countess, and plainly ask her if she will or can vouch for the antecedents of the man who presumes to call himself her relative. He is not included, you perceive, in the account of the Behrenstadt kin, or collateral branches."

Presently, it was proposed that Philip should make an endeavour to discover the unlucky name of Stanger; but the young man replied: "Like my sister, sir, I decline to attempt the task, though, for widely different reasons. I looked through the book last night, for my doubts were so irrepressibly aroused by the *cartel* of defiance, or something like it, which Aunt Jemima flung down, that I went into the library and straightway sought to disprove my own suspicions. I could not, and you could not, sir, nor can Miss L'Estrange; and for the best reason in the world—that *no such name as Stanger*, nor Kalitsky, appears from first to last in any of the lists we have so carefully perused. Count Stanger is unmistakably—an *impostor*."

Queenie was rising, in uncontrollable wrath, to challenge the truth of this very plain statement, and there was every prospect of battle-royal between the brother and sister, and poor Chrissie Osborne's heart began to beat painfully in apprehension of what she so much deprecated—a family quarrel—when the door opened, and Mrs. Fairfax made her appearance: "Jonathan, here is a gentleman who persists in seeing you, at once. Sarah announced him, and I interviewed him, because I knew neither you nor Chrissie wished to see anybody to-night. But he declares that he must make his business known to *you*—and to no one else. And, Jonathan, the moment I saw him, I knew his face; he was here last night, in attendance on Mrs. Marmaduke Merridew, whom we all call 'Aunt Jemima.' He is in your library; will you see him?"

"I suppose I must, though I do not wish to see any stranger to-night. I suppose he comes from 'Aunt Jemima'?"

"I fancy he does, though he did not say so. His face is as expressionless and impassive as ever. He looks wonderfully like a lay figure; you almost marvel to, hear him speak, he so much resembles an automaton."

"You are quite sure it is the man who accompanied Aunt Jemima?"

"Quite; there cannot be two such marble *effigies* of men in all London. Besides, he gave his name—Dr. Bernardo."

"I will go and speak with him; it must be on special business that he is here to-night. Philip, I think you had better accompany me."

"With all my heart, sir. We know nothing of any Dr. Bernardo. I should like to hear what he has to say for himself."

And without further delay the gentlemen entered the library, where, on the hearthrug, stood, tall and erect, the very remarkable-looking personage referred to. He bowed low as Mr. Osborne and his son made their appearance, yet he spoke no word. But that he had conversed for half a minute with Mrs. Fairfax, they would have imagined themselves confronted with a mute.

"I have the pleasure of meeting Dr. Bernardo, I believe?" began Mr. Osborne, awaiting the introduction of the business of which the stranger was the ambassador.

Dr. Bernardo again bowed silently.

"You have a message from Mrs. Marmaduke Merridew, I suppose?" continued Jonathan, beginning to feel mildly exasperated at the gentleman's persistent reticence; "is she quite as well as usual?"

"Mrs. Marmaduke Merridew is—*dead*!"

"Dear me! you don't mean it!" answered Jonathan, quite taken aback by the unemotional and most unexpected disclosure. "Why, she was here, as you know, in this house, at twelve o'clock last night, and she seemed not to have the smallest idea of dying!"

"Nevertheless, she has departed this life," continued the doctor, still in the same dead, monotonous voice; "she deceased early this morning, quite suddenly; though I cannot say altogether unexpectedly, for I knew that the summons might come for her at any moment."

"So very aged a person must necessarily hold her life on a most uncertain tenure ; one must die some day—no one need wish for life so far prolonged beyond the natural limits. Mrs. Merridew was over ninety—well over ninety, I am assured."

"She was over a hundred, according to my calculation. She passed her ninetieth birthday at least twelve years ago, though she always persisted in declaring herself considerably younger. She did not of intent falsify her age, I am well convinced ; her memory, though in some respects marvellous, had failed her in others ; for the last twenty years of her life she ceased to realise the actual flight of time. And on some points she would not brook the slightest contradiction—indeed, I have never allowed her to be contradicted at all."

"You have had charge of her health for some years, I think ?"

"For many years. And she could not have survived till to-day had she not been most carefully watched and tended. I warned her against last night's unwonted exertion—I felt positive the excitement would be too much for her ; the spark of life has burned so very feebly of late ; it flickered in the socket, even as she gave the fatal orders for the expedition."

"I can only say Mrs. Osborne and myself were astonished beyond measure at her appearance. She had accepted the invitation, which, as a matter of form and courtesy, she always received on the recurrence of any family entertainment ; but I should almost as soon have expected a visitant from another world as the advent of 'Aunt Jemima' !"

"I solemnly warned her of what might unhappily ensue ; Miss Stalker implored her not to make the tremendous effort. She had not been downstairs since the day she gave a small dinner-party—at which, I imagine, you were present, Mr. Osborne—to celebrate her birthday ; her seventy-seventh, she proclaimed it. We, who were in the secret, knew that it was in reality her eighty-seventh ! She lost exactly ten years in her reckoning about that time."

“ And she reached her home in safety last night, or, rather, this morning ? Tell me all that occurred, Dr. Bernardo.”

“ We—her retinue—escorted her back in safety to her own home, at West Hill. To our surprise—Miss Stalker’s and mine—she seemed in no wise the worse for her unwonted exertion. She was carried at once to her room, where she immediately demanded ‘supper.’ It was then between two and three o’clock in the morning. A brace of partridges were ready cooked, awaiting her orders—for she never, on any account, went to bed supperless ; I always took due care that something light and nutritious should be provided. Her repasts were slight, but satisfactory ; she always said that when her appetite failed her she would have *to die*.”

“ But she ate to the last, did she not ? ”

“ She trifled with a slice of the wing of her partridge, but really consumed very little. At first she declared that she was not in the least fatigued, and quite ready for her supper ; then she said she was over-tired, and asked for some very old Madeira that she reserved for special occasions. I advised a lighter wine, but she still required the Madeira. When that came she took about half a glass, perhaps not so much, but she hoped that Miss Stalker and myself enjoyed our meal, and that the men who carried her chair, together with her own servants, were well cared for in the kitchen below. She was solicitous till Miss Stalker assured her that all were being provided for downstairs. Then she seemed quite satisfied, and observed that she was ready for bed. Miss Stalker, according to custom, with her maid, attended her as she retired. I also, according to invariable custom, saw her the very last thing after she was settled on her pillows.”

“ And she seemed as usual ? ”

“ There was nothing whatever to alarm us. Her pulse was not more feeble than it frequently was ; her breathing was regular and easy, only she complained of being very, *very* tired, and so sleepy that she wanted to be left alone. She never allowed any one to watch her, and her maid slept in an adjoining room—Miss Stalker in the one beyond. I was always at hand, and within call.”

"And you were not disturbed?"

"Not till it was broad daylight. The maid came to me then with a summons from Miss Stalker—not by any means a peremptory summons—but she thought I ought to see Mrs. Merridew. I went immediately. I found her still asleep—still quietly at rest; but there was a change. The face was paler—*greyer*, I might say; the pulse was unmistakably fainter. I knew at once that she would awake—never more! We tried to administer refreshment—stimulant—but with no success. About ten o'clock I summoned a neighbouring physician, though she had always declined to see him or any medical man save myself. He came, and at once perceived that the patient was quite beyond all aid—moribund; but, at Miss Stalker's earnest entreaty, consented to remain to the end."

"And that quickly came, I suppose?"

"It came a little after noon; the precise moment we could scarcely ascertain. She died quite painlessly, and without a movement. As far as we could ascertain, she had never stirred since she lay down on her bed. She was in the attitude in which she composed herself as I left the room. She slept away all the little life that remained, after she had bidden us leave her to repose."

"Was it *a stroke*?"

"Something of the kind, no doubt. And yet, I am not sure of it. The spring of the machine ran down; the long, long life came to an end at last, and that was all. To the best of our knowledge she was in her hundred-and-third year! She might, perhaps, have lived a few days longer, had she not so imprudently exhausted the little vitality that remained in one grand, almost superhuman effort. But who shall say? She had exceeded the limit of mortal life by twenty or thirty years. She expired in the fulness of her days."

"Fulness of days, indeed! How few of us see the close of a whole century of mortal existence! I have to thank you, Dr. Bernardo, for the trouble you have taken in communicating personally the solemn tidings."

"I was requested by Mrs. Merridew, some years ago, to communicate *immediately* with yourself, whenever her

decease should occur. As soon as the first shock was over, if it could be called a shock, Miss Stalker reminded me of the duty which devolved upon me—she was too much shaken to accompany me. The funeral arrangements will, I believe, under certain stipulations, depend chiefly upon Miss Stalker and myself. We have, and have had for long, full and minute instructions. You, sir, are sole executor; the will is to be opened within twenty-four hours of death. I know its contents; I am a legatee, and so is Miss Stalker, so also are most of my patroness's faithful servants, and several other people, whose names are specified; but the principal inheritor of Mrs. Merridew's large fortune, is your daughter—Felicia Regina Dorothea Osborne."



CHAPTER XX.

MIDNIGHT CONFABULATIONS.

MISS OSBORNE and her friend sat together till past midnight, over their bedroom fire; the startling news, of which Dr. Bernardo had been the bearer, had driven all sleep out of Queenie's eyes. Florence, who had been strangely excited by the discussion caused by the non-appearance of Count Stanger's name in the *Almanach Gotha*, was in no wise disinclined to bear her company.

"And so poor old Aunt Jemima is really dead," observed Queenie, with a long-drawn breath, that was evidently meant to do duty as a decorous sigh. "I suppose I ought to say I am sorry; but I really can't, you know. She had lived her life, and it was quite time she should come to the end of it. I shall make far better use of her great wealth than she possibly could; she has been too old to enjoy it these thirty years at least."

"I suppose she was very, *very* rich, Queenie?"

"She was, undoubtedly ; though *how* rich, I cannot say. I have not the remotest idea of the extent of her income. Father says, though, I must not count too much on my heiress-ship, for the legacies are numerous, and not at all likely to be inconsiderable. Dr. Bernardo and Miss Stalker are sure to be well provided for. We don't know, till the will is read, what their claims may be. If they eat up the lion's share of the old woman's fortune I shall be desperately angry ; I should not care to figure as heiress to a few paltry hundreds, or thousands—as the case may be. I shall be thoroughly disappointed if I am not a really rich woman, and I do hope the money may not be tied up in any provoking way—that is, I hope I can do exactly as I like with it, and *at once*."

"You are sure to be under guardianship at present ; you are not of age. Your father will certainly have the command of your fortune—that is, of the *principal*—till you are twenty-one. Never mind ; whatever it is, it will only accumulate for your benefit ; a better, safer guardian than an indulgent father, like Mr. Osborne, no young woman can possibly desire."

"I suppose I shall be hampered with a guardian or trustee, or something of the sort, for the next four years, and, of course, one is safer with one's father than with anybody else ; and mine is a father in a thousand, that I must confess. Still, at seventeen, I think one ought to have full authority over one's income ; at any rate, I shall want my own as soon as I know what it actually is."

"Queenie ! don't be vexed with me ; but I hope—I do hope—you are not thinking of sharing your fortune, be it great or small, with Count Adolphe Stanger, till you know for certain precisely *who he is*."

Queenie turned round angrily. "Now, really, Flo, that is quite too bad. I thought you, at least, were on my side—you, who must feel so sure in your own heart that he is all he claims to be."

"But I am not so sure. I am by no means sure, Queenie. My dear, what do we know about him ? Only what it pleases him to tell us. He has brought no letters of introduction from any one ; he has not brought us face

to face with a single person who can testify to his respectability ; we have no authority but his own for conceding the rank and position to which he lays claim ; and—and—I must say it, Queenie, or the day may come when I shall blame myself—I do not and cannot quite believe in him. There is something in his eyes that I do not fancy ; they are so black and glittering, and *never still* ; they are what one might describe as *restless eyes* ! ”

“Such rubbish, Florence ! As if a man’s character were written in his eyes ! ”

“So it is ; and not unfrequently one reads the truth there when the tongue speaks quite another language.”

“I think Count Stanger’s eyes are remarkably fine, Miss L’Estrange. I thought you had more breadth of mind than to judge a man by the colour of his eyes—more sense than to be prejudiced against him just because that foolish *Almanach Gotha* has been careless enough, or stupid enough, to omit his name. Besides, I am still unconvinced that it really is omitted. I dare say I could find it, if I took the trouble, and if I could bring myself to doubt the word and honour of the man—I *love* ! ”

“Oh, Queenie, do you really mean that ? Do you love—actually *love*, this Stanger ? ”

“Please give him his proper title when speaking of him to the woman who loves him. Yes, I do love him *dearly*. There—you have my secret, and I trust to your honour not to divulge it, for our engagement is not at present to be announced. Only remember you are talking to Count Stanger’s betrothed—to his promised *wife*.”

“I will keep your secret, Queenie, on one condition ; you must pledge your word not to rush into a private marriage, not to do anything which you know your father and mother would strenuously oppose.”

“You talk of what you do not understand, Flo. The opposition would be on the other side of the house. The Prince and Princess of Kalitsky must first be won over to tolerate the engagement ; my father will never forbid the banns when he knows the great match his daughter is going to make ; but the Prince is an exclusive aristocrat, and will scarcely receive with cordiality the child of a British

merchant, who, though rich and of good standing in his own country, is of no rank at all. Say what one will, my father is *in trade*; and tradespeople, however wealthy and important, are *not* received by people like the Prince."

"Queenie, there is no Prince of Kalitsky! If there were, we should have found something about him in that book."

"That book, I have not the least doubt, is stupidly inaccurate; besides, the Prince's estates are, as far as I understood, in Hungary. Kalitsky, or Galitsky, whichever it may be, is in Hungary; so is Carpathia, if I do not forget my geography; and Transylvania is certainly not in any State of Germany. But at the earliest opportunity I will ask Adolphe all about it. He hides nothing from me; he was most anxious that I should know he was only the second son, and out of the succession as long as the Baron, his brother, barred the way. He was so greatly afraid of winning my affections—receiving my vows; those were his very words—on false pretences. Ah, Flo, you do not know him as I do, or you would never dream that he could be insincere."

"At least, you will take no decisive step at present; you will leave everything in abeyance till we have one proof—only *one* proof—which we can obtain without in the least compromising the Count? You must permit me to write very fully to the Countess Bertha. If she acknowledges her relationship to Adolphe Count Stanger, or to the Princess, his presumed mother, I will do my best—my very best—to convince your father that the Count is no pretender. The family, not being of German origin, *may* be left out among all those long lists of the aristocracy; but the Countess Bertha must know of the existence of her own relations, and cannot possibly have any inclination to deny the fact."

"Thank you, Flo; Adolphe can scarcely object to that, I should imagine, especially as you are already in correspondence with the Countess; but you must not write *just yet*."

"Why not?"

"Because I promised—most solemnly promised—the Count that I would not, either directly or indirectly, attempt any communication with his family for at least

three weeks. I think it was in the last week of the present month that he wished me to enter into correspondence with his people. I must have faith in him a little longer—only a very little longer; then I shall be fully repaid for my trust and patience; then I shall be his for ever.”

“How long, then, am I to wait?”

“I cannot tell you exactly; but I think the 23rd was the earliest date at which he wished me to write.”

“That does not bind *me*. I promised my aunt that I would write—become her amanuensis, that is—before Christmas was over; and it is over now. I have delayed longer than I intended; we have all been so gay—so full of engagements, since the New Year began. There has been a letter from the Countess which I am quite expected to answer, and I must not disappoint Aunt Louisa.”

“I do not wish you to disappoint her; I know you have reasons for not wishing to displease her. But why mention Adolphe’s name?”

“Aunt Louisa, at whose dictation I shall write, will most certainly make reference to the Count; and, though no direct questions may be asked, so much will be said that her friend will have no alternative but to reply. And, Queenie, I believe it is not for your good to delay an explanation any longer. I will not even mention *your* name; the Countess shall not have an idea that you have ever been introduced to him. The ‘communication’ will be entirely on my own account and my aunt’s; you shall not be compromised; the Countess does not even know of your existence, and shall not, as far as we are concerned.”

“Flo, I entreat you to delay your correspondence—at least, till I have spoken to Adolphe. Believe me, I know better than any one else what is and what is not for ‘my good.’ I have been very weak to confess the truth; I was wrong to divulge my secret, which, of course, was the Count’s as well, to any living creature. I have been specially warned against my own family; and Dolly, though she guesses, really knows nothing. I felt so worn and worried, Flo, and you and I have been close friends so long, that I felt I could refrain no longer. Having my secret—which I ought to have been strong enough to keep

to myself—you are bound, in all honour, to give no hint which shall tend to its betrayal.”

“ I shall not betray your secret, Queenie ; I don't know that it is quite the right thing to do, but if it will satisfy you, I will *swear* not to mention your name in connection with Count Stanger's. I will not mention it at all—will that content you ? ”

“ No ! for I am sure it is essential to our welfare that *his* name shall not be mentioned to his relatives, or intimates, till he himself gives full permission. I do not know *why* he objects—there is a great deal that he is going to tell me at the very first opportunity—he will make every explanation as soon as it is possible, but we had so few chances for private talk last night ; he was so afraid of prematurely attracting regards by undue notice, or by monopolising my attention.”

“ Well, Queenie, I will say not a word, nor give the slightest hint that can betray your relations with Count Stanger ; only, if I were you, I would certainly look before I took the leap—and such a leap, too—so completely in the dark. If I had a father and mother like yours, I should repose every confidence in them ; but papa and mamma are rather peculiar in their notions—in some respects, tolerably indulgent, in others, the very reverse. If I had your parents, Queenie, I am positive I should hide nothing from them.”

“ You don't know what you would do, Flo—it is all very well to talk ; we should all be saints, I suppose, were it not for the ‘ ifs ’ and ‘ buts ’ of circumstance. And, after all, I do tell them everything, as a rule, and I should have confessed my attachment to the Count, without a moment's hesitation, had he not implored me to be silent, just for a little while. Father and mother would love him, I know, when they came to know him, and not for my sake only, but because he is so charming. Why, you owned yourself, you fickle girl, that he was irresistible.”

“ Did I ? It was very foolish of me to say so, and I have changed my mind. I would not listen to him now if he knelt at my feet.”

“ Wouldn't you ? Wait till he does kneel there, Flo, my

dear. I am very sorry, but it is evidently a case of sour grapes, both with you and with Adelaide Harcourt."

"As far as I am concerned, it is nothing of the sort; and I could give you secret for secret, if I chose, Queenie. I have a lover of my own, and he is British-born and a Protestant, which your Count is not. *What is that?*"

"What is what?"

"Did you not hear a noise in the next room?"

"Well, I fancied there was a sound—a sort of stumble; but the next room is, or ought to be, empty. We had better call Philip. I do wish father would consent to a manservant or two in the house; we should all feel so much safer. Listen, Flo! I am sure something or somebody is stirring. I thought all the servants were in bed long ago?"

"Somebody is in that room, I am positive!" and Florence, who was a very spirited young woman, rose, and threw wide open the door of communication. Queenie uttered a little shriek, and then exclaimed with unfeigned astonishment, for there, just within the apartment, was Susanna South, as fully dressed as she had been two hours ago, when she respectfully bade the young ladies "good night."

"Susanna," said her mistress, "what are you doing there? Why are you not in bed?"

"Oh, dear! oh, dear!" responded Susanna, with a half hysterical gasp. "How Miss L'Estrange did frighten me. I was not very well. I am suffering agonies from that dreadful neuralgia, and I came down on tip-toe, hoping not to disturb anybody, in search of that medicine I know you keep in this room. I should have gone back and no one been the wiser, only that nasty door has been and caught again. It's a sort of spring, and it's as good as locked if the latch goes the least little bit too far. It's caught now, and I cannot get out. I was doing my best to get the tire-some thing unfastened when I stumbled over the footstool, and Miss L'Estrange called out. May I pass through your room, Miss Osborne, for I am afraid I cannot get any other way?"

"Of course you can. We will have the lock seen to,

to-morrow ; it's not the first time it has served us such a trick ! But, Susanna, come straight to me when you require anything. I do not like people to be prowling about in the adjoining room, in the dead of night, for any reason whatever."

"I humbly beg your pardon, ma'am, and Miss L'Estrange's too ; but I was really frantic with the pain, and only thought of how I could best get the *Nervine* without disturbing you or anybody. And I knew you had the bottle here, for I left it on that table myself just before I began to brush out your hair. I beg your pardon, ladies ; I am sorry I was so clumsy. If you do not want me in any way, Miss Osborne, I will retire, if you please."

"No, I do not want you at this time of night ; it is past twelve o'clock. Go to bed and use the *Nervine*. And, remember not to go into that room on any pretence after I have retired. I shall take care to have that door properly secured in future, so that it cannot be opened from the corridor."

Susanna went, and the two girls stood for a few minutes in profound meditation. Then Florence said, "Queenie, I don't know what to think of it."

"I am very much afraid the *Nervine* was an excuse. I am not very suspicious, and Susanna is such a very superior person ; but I do think she was listening."

"I am pretty sure she was ! I heard a sound that seemed close at hand, more than once, before I spoke. I am afraid your maid is in possession of your cherished secret, Queenie."

"I hope not. And yet it seems as if she must have overheard, for, believing ourselves to be quite alone, we spoke tolerably loud. Oh ! I do hope she is not given to listening at doors, and prying about where she is not wanted."

"You had a very good character with her, you say ?"

"Most excellent. Mrs. Barrington could scarcely say enough in her favour."

"Do you know Mrs. Barrington ?"

"No. I should have called upon her but for reasons ; she always gave written characters with her servants, she

thought it more satisfactory, especially as she was leaving the country almost immediately, and objected to receiving any visitors."

"You did not *see* Mrs. Barrington, then?"

"I did not; but her letter was quite to the point, and fully answered all my inquiries. And, indeed, Susanna is a treasure of a lady's maid."

"If she do not listen! She dresses you faultlessly, I must own—*à ravir*! I trust she has not that miserable fault with which we are crediting her; it would be such a pity to be obliged to make a change."

"A pity, indeed! I might never secure another maid with taste so perfect, and so very respectful. I shall take precautions, however; she will not have another opportunity of eavesdropping. And now, I do think, Florence, we had better get into bed and try to go to sleep. I believe I am drowsy at last, and the fire is fast dying down."

And, suiting the action to the word, Queenie secured both doors and lowered the gas. Very soon both young ladies were fast asleep.

Next morning Florence took her leave, and returned to her own home; her mamma, she said, would certainly be expecting her. She had no wish to renew the conversation of the preceding night. She felt more and more convinced that the Count was not a Count at all, and no cousin of her Aunt Louisa's intimate friend. The thought had flashed upon her, just before she composed herself to sleep—was he a "*chevalier d'industrie*"? She had heard how very clever, how very plausible, men of this profession could be; and Queenie, she felt sure, would be no very difficult person to deceive, especially if the deceiver knew how to pay due homage—how to worship, to adore, to express unbounded admiration.

She felt quite sure that if "Count Stanger" were to be again the subject of discourse between herself and Queenie, the result would be an open quarrel. And she really cared for Regina so much that she wished to continue her friend, and would do nothing of her own accord to terminate their pleasant intimacy. But the longer she reflected, the more convinced she was that the *soi disant* Count was no

better than an impostor. Meanwhile, she resolved not to speak of him again till she had quitted the neighbourhood of Clapham Common, and to write a letter on her aunt's account not later than the following Monday. And now it was Saturday.

Mr. Osborne spent a great part of that day at West Hill. The last will and testament of Mrs. Marmaduke Merridew was opened according to instructions, and, after generous bequests to Dr. Bernardo and Miss Stalker, who had both served the old lady faithfully for many years ; and legacies to several old servants, who were all mentioned by name, the remaining property was left, after the testator's lawful debts were paid, to "Felicia Regina Dorothea, sixth child, and sole daughter, of Jonathan Osborne and his wife, Christiana Osborne."

Her father was her appointed guardian ; and, also, he was to hold the estate in trust during her minority, which was to extend beyond the ordinary limits. Miss Osborne would not be her own mistress, in a legal point of view, till she attained her twenty-fifth birthday, and that would not happen for nearly eight years to come. The will was dated only five months back. Miss Stalker thought it but too probable that it would have been revoked had Mrs. Merridew lived a few days, or only a few hours, longer ; for she had expressed herself as being, on the whole, dissatisfied with the heiress she had at last selected. "The girl is exquisitely beautiful," she had said to her companion, as they had sat at supper ; "I never in all my long life saw a lovelier creature ! And she is not at her best *yet*, Stalker ; by no means at her best. But she is vain, and imperious, and headstrong. If she does not behave herself, if she once offends me, I shall make another will, and leave all that does not go to you and to Bernardo to some orphan asylum, or, perhaps, to Bethlehem Hospital."

Jonathan Osborne went home when he had read over a number of papers relating to the property bequeathed, and ascertained that Aunt Jemima's debts were nothing very alarming.

The household-books were all in Miss Stalker's keeping, and they had been audited, one and all, by the venerable

mistress of the establishment, up to a very recent period. Mrs. Merridew boasted that she had always paid *ready-money*—that is to say, her accounts were settled weekly, monthly, or at the furthest, quarterly; and even some of the Christmas bills were already paid. Still, Mr. Osborne was somewhat surprised at the immense expenditure that these accounts revealed; the fact being that the old lady kept up an establishment befitting a person of royal rank, and though she owed no man anything, had lived pretty nearly up to her income.

So when Felicia Regina Dorothea understood her exact position, and knew that she was what the law terms “residuary legatee,” she was by no means fully satisfied. In the first place, she was not free to make “ducks and drakes” with her money till she was almost an old woman; for to Queenie, twenty-five seemed quite ancient, and, what was nearly as bad, she would not for some months to come, till “the estate was wound up,” as her father phrased it, know certainly how much she was really worth. And Mr. Osborne scarcely mended matters when he said to his daughter, “The legacies to the doctor and to Miss Stalker are generous, as they ought to be, but not one whit exceeding; they fully deserve the comfortable income that is secured to them, for they have been everything to Aunt Jemima for the last 20 or 30 years. But the expenditure has been something tremendous. Mrs. Merridew has kept her house in right royal style; witness the state in which she came to us the other night! She has never grudged cost, she has paid everybody right and left with extreme liberality; she has indulged every wish, if not every whim; she has been most exacting in her requirements, stipulating always for prompt and implicit obedience, and having her own way unchecked; but she has scattered *largesse* with an open hand wherever she went, and on whomsoever served her well and truly. Still, Queenie, when the will is administered, and the last debt and legacy deducted, I should say you will be the inheritor of ten or twelve, or even fifteen thousand pounds.”

“Not more than that?” asked Queenie; “fifteen thousand pounds is not an immense fortune.”

"Fifteen thousand pounds, as I shall manage the money for you, and *nurse* it during your extended minority, will represent certainly an income of eight hundred a year—probably more. Dear me, child, your mother and I would have thought ourselves in luck, indeed, if we could have been secure of five, or even three hundred a year, in the days of our early married life. Besides, I shall have something not exactly inconsiderable to leave behind me when it pleases God to call me to Himself; your share will not be lacking any more than your brothers! Why, my dear, you are just *Fortune's favourite*!"

"Well, I suppose I must make the best of it," quoth Miss Osborne, with a little Frenchified shrug of her shoulders; "fortune is kind enough, all things considered. I am not going to grumble; but her favours are not so overwhelming that I stand much chance of being *spoiled*, as is Aunt Rachel's opinion."

"I am not so sure of that!" said her father, as he fondly stroked her long golden-brown hair. "You are not half as grateful as you ought to be, Pussy-cat! I am afraid you do not at all realise how goodly is the heritage with which Providence has dowered you. Your lines are indeed cast in pleasant places, my Queenie; you ought to be always singing, 'Praise God from whom all blessings flow.'"

"That is just like you, father; I believe you sing a doxology every night and morning, to say nothing of the *Te Deums* you chant privately, whenever things go tolerably aright. But I want to know now, shall we be obliged, on account of our 'bereavement,' to, as people say, stay at home to-morrow?"

"By no means! Because Aunt Jemima, in the very ripest old age, has departed this mortal life in peace, why should we shut ourselves up, and pretend to be sitting in sackcloth and ashes? Had she not paid us that strange visit the other evening, not one person in a thousand would have guessed that she was, even remotely, of our blood. We will wear plain and decent black clothes for a little while, what the world calls 'mourning'; we will conform so far to the world's fashion; but we will not stay at home

from church, neither will we shut the daylight out from our rooms. Your mother thinks as I do."

"I am so glad; for I hate staying away from church against my inclination; and I want specially to go to-morrow, for I know that Hopkins' *Te Deum* is to be sung, and it is simply glorious! There is no church music like ours, father; there is scarcely a person among us who does not read music! And we have some of the loveliest voices, both in the choir and out of it. Talk of a cathedral service, it is not to be compared with ours, in which a whole congregation joins! *We* are one vast choir!"



CHAPTER XXI.

LATE FOR CHURCH.

ALL the Osborne family appeared at church on Sunday morning, and Hopkins' *Te Deum* was most successfully given, to Queenie's unbounded satisfaction. Mrs. Osborne was in her usual place at the service, so was the household generally, with the exception of the cook and kitchenmaid, and Annie Derrington, who was suffering from a distracting nervous headache. Dolly volunteered to remain with her sister, but Annie would not hear of it; she knew how very much Dolly, as a rule, enjoyed the services, and the morning was so brilliant and clear, that it really did seem a great pity for any one not absolutely compelled to stay at home to miss the pleasant walk across the Common.

Mrs. Fairfax had returned to her own house; she never liked spending Sunday away from home. She dined usually with one of her sons, or one of them dined with her; and on this particular Sunday she had faithfully promised "Tom" that nothing should prevent her spending the day

with him and his family, who were one and all ready to welcome "grandmamma."

Queenie found herself rather low-spirited as the day went on. For one thing, she was suffering from the reaction consequent on the excitement under which she had laboured for many days. She had participated in so many festivities that she was fairly tired, even before her own visitors arrived at "The Acacias." The events of that memorable evening, too, had excited her excessively; first of all, there had been the difficulty of arranging who should have the honour of opening the ball with her; then there was the unexpected advent of "Aunt Jemima," and her remarkable retinue; followed by that lady's disclosures and criticisms; not to speak of the vexation which Adelaide Harcourt's ill-natured reference to her favourite "Count" had caused her. Then had followed brief snatches of enjoyment, when, for a minute or two, she and the Count had found it possible to indulge in private interviews, or to exchange small confidences, as ever and anon they met in the mazes of the dance. And all through, something like disappointment—or was it misgiving?—had haunted her; she could not tell why or wherefore; but the sense of being *baffled* constantly pursued her after she had listened for a while to what her lover had to say. He was so very prudent! He was desperately afraid of compromising himself—or so it seemed to her; so very much afraid lest the secret of their clandestine engagement should transpire an hour before the proper time; and Queenie was so used to her own way, whether in trifling or important matters, that she had no idea of being fettered or restrained even in the smallest particular.

Then there had been that most annoying episode of the *Almanach de Gotha*. How she hated the very sight of the tiresome squat little volume, which she longed to fling behind the fire, and only refrained because it would appear so very strange, and because some one—her brother, Philip, perhaps—would be certain to procure another copy, without loss of time. She could wreak her vengeance on the offending book by committing it to the flames, of course, and that would be some satisfaction; but she could not

burn all the *Almanachs de Gotha* in the world ; even though she were the heiress of Mrs. Marmaduke Merri-dew, and the betrothed of the Count Adolphe Friedrich Stanger.

Her father's communication, when he returned from interviewing Dr. Bernardo, had given her almost a shock ; and the conversation that had ensued between her and Florence had not tended to restore her equanimity. She felt, as she said, worried, harassed, and by no means satisfied with herself ; and that her friend in whom she trusted should take sides against her—joining, as it were, with the " Opposition " who distrusted her Adolphe's very word—irritated her to the utmost pitch. But for Susanna South's opportune, or inopportune, appearance upon the scene, there was no saying how the discussion might have ended ; for Queenie's secret uneasiness made her actually quarrelsome, and Florence was not accustomed to yield her own opinion when once it was arrived at.

On the whole, she was not very sorry that Miss L'Estrange had so abruptly terminated her visit ; and yet she missed her—as the only person with whom she could freely converse on the all-important theme which filled her mind ; nay, so completely engrossed it, that she could not give herself to the calm and exclusive contemplation of her new position as a lady of independent fortune. So that, though Queenie really did, to a certain extent, enjoy that Sunday morning's service, especially the musical part of it, she did not pay much attention to the sermon to which her mother and father, her brother and Dolly, listened with rapt attention. Nevertheless, she joined in the closing hymn, and her clear, bird-like voice rose so sweetly—so triumphantly—that Chrissie was almost fain to hope that her darling's heart was ascending with her song. Philip, too, thought how exquisite was his sister's lovely pure soprano ; yet at the same time he was not at all sure but that he preferred the rich, deep notes of Dolly's wonderful contralto.

But the service came to an end ; the last full chord, the deep melodious "*Amen*," swelled and died among the dark oaken rafters of the high-pitched roof ; the splendid organ poured forth its exquisite strains, and slowly the crowded

congregation passed out into the bright wintersunshine. Mr. and Mrs. Osborne drove home, for the brougham, though not often used on Sunday, had been ordered out specially on Chrissie's account; the walk in the chill air, to the other end of the Common, being considered, on all hands, rather too much for her.

The young people, of course, walked, according to custom. Dolly and Philip never dreamed, except on very rare occasions, of doing anything else; but Queenie frequently required the accommodation of a carriage, unless the weather happened to be exceptionally fine—neither wet, nor dusty, nor windy, nor too warm, nor uncomfortably cold. And Dolly and Philip chatted pleasantly as they trod the accustomed path beneath the leafless branches, and by the glittering waters of the large pools. But Queenie held her peace, and joined not at all in the conversation.

"What's up?" said Philip, at last, as he turned to help his sister over a little half-frozen puddle which the noontide beams had melted; "I say, Queenie, you have over-danced yourself; I knew you would, I told Dolly you were going it a little too strong in those after-supper dances; and, you know, you *flirted*!"

"I never flirt," returned Queenie, shortly. "I will thank you not to say disagreeable things."

"Oh, I did not mean to vex you, Queenie; perhaps you do not call it flirting, though I must say it was very much like it; now, wasn't it, Dolly?"

But Dolly prudently refrained her lips. Though, at last, noting Queenie's displeased looks, she ventured to say, "Do not let us talk of 'flirting,' as we walk home from church; the word sounds so ugly and so little in keeping with this sweet, bright Sabbath-day."

But Queenie was of that peculiar disposition—not very rare, alas! that in certain moods refuses to be pacified by the "soft word," which the ancient Proverbial Philosophy recommends. She turned angrily to both her companions; she was evidently on the brink of exploding. "Say what you like!" she exclaimed, bitterly. "Whatever may be your strictures, it is all one to me. Dolly has had the grace to be silent, but I know well what she thinks! As for you,

Philip, you have said things that I never can forget ; I have not forgiven you, perhaps I never shall !”

“What *do* you mean, Queenie ?” asked Philip, amazed. He had for the moment forgotten the interlude of the *Almanach de Gotha* ; nor, in truth, had he guessed at all how keenly his sister had been wounded. “What is it ?” he repeated. “What has vexed you, dear ?”

“It is all very well to be conciliatory now,” returned Queenie ; “but I am not one of those who easily forgive an injury ; and if I do forgive—as a *duty*—I never *forget*.”

“What can you mean, child ? What injury have *I* done you ?”

“You are affecting ignorance ! It is not twenty-four hours since you insulted me—as I never was insulted before. Please to take notice that I always resent, and ever shall resent, imputations cast upon my *friends*, more warmly than those which reflect upon myself.”

“But what friend of yours have I offended ? Is it Florence L'Estrange ? I should not have taken her for a spit-fire ; I thought her rather nice. I suppose it is Adelaide Harcourt who has been making mischief !”

“Not at all ; and you know it, Philip. Dolly remembers to what I refer ; I see it in her looks.”

“What is it, Dolly ? Do enlighten me.” And the young man turned to her.

“I had so much rather have nothing at all to do with the dispute,” was Dolly's distressed answer. “I did not utter a word at the time, and I would rather not now, if you please. What I say, or leave unsaid, can be of so little consequence.”

Then Queenie burst out. “For goodness' sake, Philip, don't bother Dolly ; she is ready to cry, I know ; there are tears in her voice. Surely a scene on the Common is undesirable. I am quite capable of replying on my own account. Since you pretend to forget all about your most offensive remark, I will remind you ; for none are so deaf as those who *will* not hear, and none so oblivious as those who refuse to remember.”

“Well, Queenie ? I think, though, I begin to see the point of the accusation. I suppose that the head and front

of my offending is that I refused to consult the *Almanach de Gotha* for a name which I knew too well it did not—and *could not*—contain, unless, indeed——”

“ Unless what ? ”

“ Unless the individual whose name we will not mention is personating some nobleman who *is* included in the Lists. *Stanger* may be or may not be a fictitious title, after all, though I am tolerably persuaded that it is. Queenie, my little sister, I would not willingly annoy you for the world ; but you must not—indeed, you must not—call that man your *friend*. He is *an impostor* ! And I say it not in anger, but in sorrow ; not in haste and malice, but from pure settled conviction. However, my dear, since you take up the cudgels in his defence, I think it is time that ‘ Stanger,’ as he calls himself, were brought to book and compelled to account for his representations. He has chosen to obtrude himself on us, we have not sought him ; no respectable person can blame us if we require undeniable proofs of his veracity—if we ask him for *references*. Let us drop the vexed question for to-day, Queenie ; as Dolly reminds us, it is Sunday. To-morrow I will take proper action ; I will hesitate no longer.”

“ What will you do ? ”

“ I will see Stanger—that is, if he is to be found—tell him plainly that my father and I are in doubt of him, and beg him at once to furnish us with all necessary proofs of his identity.”

“ Surely Mrs. Everett—Florence’s own aunt—is ‘ reference ’ enough, even for your suspicious nature. She knows the Countess Behrenstadt as well as it is possible for one human being to know another. They were at school together in Paris, and they have corresponded ever since. Why, there was the name and the whole *pedigree*, I believe, in that stupid, senseless *Almanach de Gotha*.”

“ The Countess Behrenstadt’s rank and position are, of course, undeniable, and she will be quite reference enough for our purpose. I shall ask Stanger straight out if he will refer me to the Countess Behrenstadt. If he answer in the affirmative I shall write immediately to her ladyship, stating the exact circumstances under which I venture to intrude

myself. If her answer be what it *must be*—if she be really that young man's relative—I shall be fully satisfied, and I will make my apologies to Stanger for having doubted his word. Surely you cannot disapprove?"

"I disapprove altogether. Suppose *you* go to Paris, or Dresden, or Berlin, and you wish to be intimate with a family or families that seem to be desirable, and some kind person questions your account of yourself, and looks in a *London Directory* to find out whether you really are the man you represent yourself to be—Philip Osborne, of Lawrence Pountney Lane and Clapham Common?"

"Whenever I go to either city you mention I shall take my credentials with me. If you are stopping in a place you must mention your banker, and, if need be, he can be communicated with at once. Anybody may be satisfied who *I* am. My father talks of sending me on business to St. Petersburg, where I do not know a single creature; but I shall carry with me *letters of introduction* and documents which cannot be disputed by any sane person. Let Stanger give his banker's address; that will be ample guarantee."

"Probably he has no banker. You forget that he is a stranger in a foreign land. What does he know about bankers?"

"Banking, in some shape or other, is common to all civilised communities. A man of his rank—if, indeed, he have any—is as certain to 'bank' as he is to eat and drink. Queenie, remember that you know nothing of business—absolutely nothing; leave the matter in my hands. I promise you that I will be most courteous, most discreet; I will behave to him as one gentleman should behave to another till I know that he is *not* a gentleman, and then——"

"Well, and what then?"

"Having established, beyond the shadow of a doubt, that the man is—what I am sorely afraid he is—an *impostor*, I shall, perhaps, kick him out of the house, if he set foot within it. No; rather I shall hand him over to the police, who will take care that he is heard—in a Court of Justice."

What Queenie was about to reply is not on record. It was something extremely severe, no doubt; but she was too

furious to speak calmly. As she confessed afterwards, she was *choking* with the anger she could neither express nor suppress. That *he* should be threatened with such an indignity—*he*, the son of a Prince, and the probable heir to a Princedom! And, above all, *her lover*! whom, however, she was in all honour bound not to name as such. She could actually say nothing, do nothing, in his defence till he chose to come forward and openly declare himself.

Just then home was reached, and the subject need not any further be pursued. The hall-door was open, and Queenie rushed in at once, and ran upstairs without another word. When, half-an-hour afterwards, she came down, at the summons of the dinner-gong, there were traces of tears on her lovely face, but she had regained her equanimity. Annie had recovered from her headache. There was plenty to say about the morning's sermon and about the singing, which Queenie averred had never sounded half so well before. She talked volubly to all, except to her brother; to him she never spoke, nor did she turn her head in his direction. Rather to Dolly's surprise, a good deal of her conversation was addressed to Annie, and her headache much deplored, inasmuch as it kept her at home and prevented her from joining in that splendid *Te Deum*, which Queenie was sure would exactly suit her voice. In her estimation, a few more good *sopranos* were wanted in the congregation, and a few more accurate *bassos*. They were rather overdone, she thought, both with *tenors* and *contraltos*.

The afternoon passed quietly away. Miss Osborne was quite in high spirits, and proposed a little music, even before the dessert was cleared away. But she refused to preside at the pianoforte, on the plea that her fingers were too tremulous; and when they all began to sing, it was discovered that she was by no means in "good voice." She managed very well, however, in chorus. "Lead, kindly Light" and "The Pilgrims of the Night" went splendidly, as they all declared; but when two or three popular hymns had been sung, and a new tune and a new chant essayed, and the one voted "poor" and the other "bald," Mr. Osborne asked for his old favourite, "Lead me, oh, Thou Great Jehovah,"

and after that for "Jesu, Lover of my Soul," to an almost discarded tune that used to be sung in churches and chapels when he was "quite a boy."

And by the time his requirements had all been fulfilled, it was growing dark, and the circle around the piano had gathered on the hearth, talking of all sorts of things. Only once Philip said something of the ball, and his father remonstrated: "Do let us put that unlucky dance out of our heads, for to-day, at least. Dear me, I am so thankful, children, that it is all over! Why, Queenie, here, would not care to go through it again—now, would you?"

"I cannot say," hesitated Queenie; "not at present, certainly; but I did enjoy myself, and I looked so well in my sapphires; I wonder if poor Aunt Jemima noticed them."

"I scarcely know, my dear; how should she? and yet, to a certain extent, her senses seemed quite acute. I hope your jewel-case is safe, Queenie?"

"Quite. Both sapphires and pearls, and a few other things that I value, are stowed away in the cabinet, under lock and key. I am so much obliged to you, father, for having the sapphires re-set so beautifully; I never could have worn them in their former antiquated fashion. Poor Aunt Jemima!"

"I scarcely know why we should speak of her as 'poor.' Her long life is over, and she has gone to her God."

"The longest life comes to an end some day," said Queenie, with a sigh. "I wish I could be sure of being a very old woman."

"As old as Aunt Jemima?"

"Well, *no*! I think I should not care to be more than *eighty*. One can have no enjoyment in life, when one exceeds the fourscore, to which we are in some sense limited. It is almost like flying in the face of Providence to exceed a certain age, and to be over a hundred is really too terrible to think of."

"Yet poor Aunt Jemima could not help living on all these years," said Dolly, pityingly. "She had to wait God's time."

"I suppose she had," returned Queenie. "But, oh dear,

I do hope I shall not live till my skin is like parchment, and my eyes like lights faintly glimmering out of the dark, and my fingers like claws. It must be dreadful to be ugly. How I pity the man in the old mythology, whose prayer for immortality was granted, but who forgot to ask for the gift of perennial youth. When old age really comes—when I am toothless and wrinkled, and yellow, and my eyes are dim, and my voice shrill and wiry—then I shall be quite ready to die.”

“Are you sure of that?” asked her mother, solemnly.

“Yes, I think so; my life would not be worth living when all that made it bright and beautiful was gone. Only——only——”

“Only you have been taught, my Queenie, that life does not end when this poor body of our humiliation is laid in the grave. There is the great Eternity beyond; there is the other life in the world to come.”

“Now, mammy dear, don't *preach!*” implored Queenie. “It is quite enough for one's minister to preach to one on Sundays; I should be very sorry not to go to church once a week, you know. But when one's father and mother take to sermonising, and Dolly has something just a little serious to say to one, and check one's full flow of spirits; and dear old Nursie—her text is always ‘prepare!’—*prepare for death!*”

“And mine is—prepare for life, Queenie, dear. Oh, my love, if you will but live to God—serve Him, praise Him, and glorify Him, here below—what is called *death* will only be going up higher.”

“Yes, mother; but I cannot think of death at all, yet.”

“Then think of *life*, my dear; the life that is of God, and in God; the only happy, satisfying life. A life that once begun, in Jesus Christ our Lord, will never, *never* end.”

“Ah, mother dear, you are so good. I shall never be like you. And yet—I should like to *die* a Christian.”

“Ah, my Queenie, there was one who said in olden time, ‘Let me die the death of the righteous, and let my last end be like His!’ But he never prayed, ‘Let me live the life of the righteous.’ To desire only ‘peace and

safety' as ungodly people do, is simply selfish—*un*-Christ-like !”

“And yet ministers preach, and preach about the great end of life, and urge upon young people to secure their own salvation. And don't we sing—though it is a very old-fashioned hymn, and our pastor will have it to that exploded tune that father and you are so fond of—‘Salvation ! ’tis a joyful sound !’”

“And it is a joyful sound—a sound that is worth all other sounds put together ; but what do you understand by ‘salvation’ ?”

“Why, being saved, *of course* !”

“Saved from what ?”

“Saved from sin ; is not that right ?”

“Yes ; but to be saved from *consequences* is not the same as being saved from sin. We are not to be saved *in* our sin, Queenie ; Christ never promised forgiveness to those who are content to live on in sin, who defer repentance, who care not to repent. And to repent means a great deal more than being sorry ; it means *a turning* ; a leaving of sin behind, and pressing on towards God as our Father ; towards God in Christ, as our Redeemer, our Exemplar. I am afraid many people who say all their hope and trust is in Christ, forget that He *lived* as well as died for us.”

“I will try to think about it,” said poor Queenie, almost tearfully. “But I do like singing hymns, and I love to hear father read the Bible at morning and evening worship, especially some of it. But I know more is wanted—a great deal more.”

And then Sarah came in to light the gas, and the gloom of semi-darkness was dispersed, and with it the solemnity—or much of the solemnity—that had fallen on the little circle while the grey, winter-twilight deepened into dusk. Presently the tea-tray was carried in—for the Osbornes, who loved the old fashions of earlier days, were always ready for the refreshment at five o'clock, and no later, that the servants might have a nice long evening, and prepare in time for church. And the evening service commenced at half-past six in those days ; it is only of late years that the hour has been changed, in London especially, to seven.

The bells of the parish church commenced their jangling chime exactly as the clock struck six; and Mr. Osborne instantly rose with "Now, girls, get your bonnets on; we were *almost* too late last Sunday evening."

"Are you going, Queenie?" It was Dolly's low voice that put the question.

"Of course I am. I would rather stay at home in the morning than in the evening, I think. The evening service, too, is better always, and I like the sermon as a rule. But, father, there is no hurry; you like to be in the pew ages before the *Voluntary* begins. I wonder what the organist will play to-night."

"I do not know, Queenie; and you exaggerate a little in your statement of particulars. I am content if we are in our places, as the folk in the parish church belfry begin what I believe is called the 'tolling-in.' There is some good in bells, certainly; they keep one up to the mark, provided they are not always making a noise; and provided, too, that one is willing to take them as a reminder. Now, really, Queenie, we shall be late; do go at once."

"We do not drive to-night, I suppose?"

"No; for we are an able-bodied party. Mother, of course, will stay at home, as usual; you are all of you young and active, and I am strong enough to enjoy the walk at least once a day. I like Sunday to be a rest-day, as far as may be, to my men-servants and maid-servants, and my cattle, and all that are within my gates. And I think we must go the longer way to-night; the cross-path is very badly lighted, and there is not the vestige of a moon."

By-and-by, Dolly and Annie, attended by Philip, were drawing on their gloves in the hall. Queenie had not yet made her appearance. Mr. Osborne still lingered in the drawing-room, saying a few parting words to his wife: "Now take care of yourself, my dear, while we are away; remember, this room is very warm, and you ought not to be exposed to any sudden chill. And you look very tired to-night, Chrissie; I am afraid this morning was rather too much for you."

"No, no, indeed! I am not so great an invalid yet that

I am unequal to one service in the day. And driving, too, in our own carriage, is really no exertion. Ah ! how little I ever dreamed when I married you, Jonathan, that the day would come when we should drive to church together in our own luxurious brougham ! I scarcely liked it at first ; now Queenie takes to driving any day, and every day, most kindly."

"Queenie is a luxurious young puss ! And I am more than half afraid we have made a *leetle* too much of her ; she will not brook the slightest opposition ; but I am glad I stood firm about those card-tables. But you *do* look very tired, love."

"I am tired, but not with the effort of the morning. I am tired with all the bustle of the last few days, and Aunt Jemima's death has been something of a shock, following so suddenly upon her unlooked-for presence among us. I do hope, dear, this is our first—and *last*, ball."

"It has been our first, without question, and it shall be our *last* if I have any voice in the matter. Shall I stay with you to-night ?"

"Oh no ; certainly not ; I am all right, and I am going to have a quiet evening. Nurse is not going out, as once a day is enough for her now, poor old body ; she is getting so very rheumatic. I shall have half-an-hour to myself, and then ring for her—I suppose one of the maids will be at home, as usual."

"Of course, they take it in turns, do they not ? But where *is* Queenie ?"

And Mr. Osborne hurried to the hall, where Philip and the two girls were still waiting ; and seeing no signs of his daughter, he beat rather uproariously on the gong. "Go," he said to his son, "don't delay ; we need not *all* be late ; Queenie and I will follow ; she cannot be much longer now." So Philip and the young ladies took their departure, and they had been gone about three minutes when Miss Osborne came tearing down stairs, ready, but breathless. She had to pause a few seconds before she could explain that she was really very sorry—she had no idea of being late ; but when she went to her room she found none of her things in readiness, and her fur-lined jacket had to be hunted

out of a certain wardrobe, where she was not accustomed to keep it.

"I am afraid your maid is not quite as punctual as could be wished," said Mr. Osborne, as in despair of reaching the church in time, they began to traverse the shorter path across the Common; which path they never took on dark nights, because, for obvious reasons, the well-lighted road which skirted the Common was greatly to be preferred.

"Oh, Susanna is really tiresome," replied Queenie, pettishly. "Her *neuralgia* is a downright nuisance; she says if it do not get better soon she is sure she will go off her head; and, really, she is so strange that I do not know what to think of it. She said something about a little holiday; and I don't know that I want her so very much just now; I am tired of dissipation, and I need some rest myself. I think I could spare her for a week."

"Of course you could. You did very well without her once, you can do without her again. I am not much taken with Miss Susanna, I must tell you, Queenie. But I am sorry for the poor girl's suffering; she cannot help this miserable neuralgia of hers, or of course she would. We used to call it *tic-douloureux* in my young days; and 'dolorous' it was, as I can testify; though I am not at all sure that it was anything more than *racking toothache*. What does she take for it?"

"Oh, all sorts of things! I got a new kind of *nervine* for her the other day, but it seems to do no manner of good. And she has plenty of port—good sound old port, such as the doctors recommend. Philip brought up a bottle for her only this morning. I told her she might go to bed, I should not want her again to-night; but she said she could not lie down without excruciating agony. She thought she would sit in the great easy-chair in the dining-room, and keep up the fire while we were away: perfect quiet and warmth was sometimes the only efficacious remedy. AH!"

"What ever is the matter, child?" For Queenie—who had her father's arm—suddenly exclaimed, and started violently, stopped short for an instant, then seemed to recover herself, and proceeded on her way churchwards. "But what is it? Was it pain, or fright?"

"Neither, neither ; only I am so foolishly startled. As there is the tolling-in-bell, we shall be late ; I can walk a little faster, father—we have still some way to go."

The truth was, Queenie had had a sort of scare. In order to get over the ground as speedily as was possible, and knowing every yard of their own familiar Common, the father and daughter, in their great anxiety not to be "too late" had struck into a most unfrequented path, which crossed at a certain angle the broader road that led in another direction. And just under a lamp-post, and yet within shade of the trunk of a spreading tree, stood, almost close to her, Count Adolphe Stanger. He was the very last person she had expected to see ; for he had given her to understand that he had very special business, on which much depended, somewhere in the country, "three hundred miles away ;" and it was settled between them that he should not make his appearance at "The Acacias," nor pay any visit to Clapham Common, till he could inform her, by special message, that such arrangements had been made as warranted his demanding an interview with Mr. Osborne ; and putting to flight the absurd suspicions that he was quite sure had occurred to both father and brother, on the eventful night of the grand ball.

Queenie's first thought was that she saw *a ghost*, but a second's reflection was quite enough to convince her that it was Count Stanger in the flesh, who was so unexpectedly at her elbow. And Count Stanger, looking as he had never looked before, and as she fervently trusted he might never look again, or she would certainly be compelled to *scream* ! She did not as a rule scream because she was frightened, but that face terrified her. It did not look like itself, and there was an expression in the bright dark eyes that confounded her, and they *were* twinkling, and they *were* restless.

She tried to reassure herself by deciding that it was *not* he. She had made a mistake, it could not be ; it must be somebody with a strange likeness to her dear Adolphe—a sort of "diabolical likeness," she was almost impelled to say. The shadow and the sudden glare of the gas lamp combined to bewilder her ; and no doubt, after all that had

passed of late, her nerves were just a little shaken. She had been living, off and on, an unreal life for more than a fortnight ; what wonder was it that she should fancy something unreal in the gloom and shadow of the moonless, starless night ? But vainly she argued thus within herself, and she could not, strive as she might, "lay the flattering unction to her soul." It *was* Count Stanger she had seen, she was positive of the fact ; and he was where he had no business to be, in the dark and chilly night ; and he was not dressed in his ordinary fashion. She could almost have vowed that he had a weapon of some sort in his hand. He looked more like a *burglar* than the descendant of a princely house.

Were her eyes to be opened at last. Were her friends in the right after all ? Was he "*an impostor*" ? Again and again she asked herself the question as she sat in her father's comfortable crimson-cushioned pew ; and the organ pealed its glorious thunder, the pastor prayed and preached, and the great congregation bowed their heads, or sat, or stood to sing, beneath the dark-timbered roof of the sanctuary. But neither prayer nor praise entered Queenie's troubled heart, and she joined not at all in the evening service.



CHAPTER XXII.

"OH, MY SAPPHIRES !"

CHRISSIE OSBORNE had her quiet half-an-hour, as she had contemplated, and then she rang for Nurse, who enjoyed above all things a Sunday evening with her mistress. Nurse, of course, was "not quite so young as she had been," and she had taken of late to going out only to the morning service. Her rheumatism became more

and more disabling, and she had begun to complain of asthmatic tendencies, and to find walking in the dark by no means a desirable experience. Mrs. Osborne never went out now after sunset; Mr. Graham had forbidden it, and Nurse was more than willing to bear her company. She knew perfectly, as she heard the front door shut after her master and Miss Queenie, as they set off for church, that before seven o'clock she would be summoned to the drawing-room, to read or talk with her mistress, till the family returned home. And when the bell rang, as it did, almost to the minute, every Sunday night, Nurse understood what was expected of her, and gathered up her books, looked to the back entrances, saw that the lower shutters were all fastened, and took her way upstairs with the utmost satisfaction.

"Who is downstairs?" asked Mrs. Osborne, as Nurse took her accustomed seat. It had been arranged that two of the maids should keep guard at home on the Sunday evenings. As the mistress was now always at home herself, and Nurse with her, it was thought that only *one* of the servants need be detained from public worship.

"It is Fanny's turn, is it not?" asked Chrissie, as she and her faithful attendant settled themselves by the fireside. "I hope there are plenty of nice and suitable books in the servants'-hall for the girls' reading?"

"Plenty, thank you, ma'am; Mr. Philip has seen to that; he brought us quite a stock just before Christmas, and gave them into my charge, and I have had them all properly covered and numbered, as I know you like the kitchen library to be. But it is not Fanny who stays in to-night. 'Miss South,' as she prefers to be called downstairs, has her face, or her head—I scarcely know which she complains of most—ever so bad again. I tell her she must have a decayed tooth; teeth are, ninety-nine times out of a hundred, at the bottom of what everybody says is '*neuralgia*'; and I want her to go to-morrow morning to the Pavement, and have it out. What with bad nights, and raging pain all day, one's life is hardly worth having—especially if the sure remedy is direct to hand, and you have nothing to do but to screw up your courage, make up your mind for a dreadful

tug, and have it over. I've told Susanna I will go with her, if she likes, to the dentist's. I hope I shall be able to persuade her."

"I hope you will. Then, I understand that Susanna is at home, and Fanny gone to church?"

"Just so, ma'am; there was no need, that I could see, for any of the other servants to stay in, and Susanna said she would quite as lief be alone. Miss Queenie bade her go to bed at once, but she made answer that she was a great deal easier sitting up—just leaning back in an easy chair. She's in the dining-room, in master's big leather chair, by the fire, that she promises she'll see to keeping-up."

"I hope all is quite safe downstairs, Nurse?"

"Oh, yes, ma'am, I've been round myself. I never trust to any of the other servants, except it is cook—she is reliable enough—but I almost always go round the house myself after dark, and see to the fastenings—especially on Sunday evenings."

"That is well; for I have been thinking that we are very lonely at this end of the Common; and there is a gang of housebreakers going about this winter, I am told, and effecting continual robberies. I am afraid the police are not quite so much on the alert as they ought to be in these secluded spots."

"Well, ma'am, I am not much afraid, though I must own to being a little bit nervous after that Bella Fowkes came offering herself as Miss Queenie's maid. But I've got over it now pretty well; the more especially as master has had so many strong bolts put on the outer doors; and Mr. Philip has had the alarm-bell seen to, so that it will act beautifully. It wasn't of much use before, for the cranks were as rusty as rusty. With proper care, just giving regular attention to the doors and windows, I think we've not much cause for fear, for all we are lonely enough; and that Bella Fowkes looked for all the world like a female burglar in disguise. And there's nobody to let the robbers *in*—there isn't a traitor in the household, thank God."

"No; all our servants, from the oldest to the youngest, are, I believe, faithful and trustworthy. We know who and

what they are, and all about their people ; there is not one of them of whose antecedents we know nothing."

" Well, ma'am, I can hardly quite go with you there, if I may be pardoned for saying so. What *do* we know about Susanna South ? "

" We had a very good character with her—an exceptionally good character. And she seems so very superior ; and, but that I am afraid her health is a little uncertain, she gives Queenie the utmost satisfaction."

" She is rather *too* superior, in some ways, I'm thinking."

" In what way ? Have you not faith in her ? "

" Well, ma'am, since you ask the plain question I am bound to give you a plain answer. No ! I don't feel confidence in Susanna South. God forgive me if I wrong her, but I can't get over the feeling that she is *somehow playing a part*. I've tried and tried to make friends with her ; but she does not seem to me to be sincere ; I'm always thrown back upon myself, as it were. And then I take myself to task, for it isn't Christian-like to be uncharitable ; as I am very much afraid I am. Perhaps I am naturally suspicious, and in my old age I am growing rather worse than better. I don't like new faces—it's an infirmity that I must strive against this New Year. Maybe I shall like Susanna better when I am more used to her."

" I remember a time when you were a little doubtful about cook, Nurse ; and yet she has proved to be one of the best servants I ever had."

" So she has, ma'am ; so she has ! and in my own station of life I don't wish to have a better friend. We've pulled together—cook and me—ever since the time I first took to her, and that was before she had been in the service a full three months. Well, I hope I may like Susanna when I come to understand her better ; for she knows her duties, and spares no pains, I must say. It is not quite comfortable, though, to be living in the same house with a person whom you inly distrust."

" No, it is not, Nurse," assented Mrs. Osborne, not without emphasis. " And do you know I cannot quite take to Susanna, nor can your master. Mr. Philip vows she is a ' Jesuit in disguise ; ' and Dolly, I can see, has not the

best opinion of her, though she has scarcely referred to her."

"*Madam*," returned Nurse, earnestly, and in a scarcely audible voice, and giving her mistress the ceremonious title which she never used except on rare and important occasions. "I don't believe she *is* a Nonconformist. She only says she is, because Nonconformity is the law of this house. And her leading principle is to do at Rome as Rome does, as Master Philip says. She is no Protestant Dissenter, trust me, ma'am. And there was no such person in the world ever, as that 'sainted Lady Selina Severn.'"

"But of what value, then, is Mrs. Barrington's testimony? She assured Queenie that Susanna attended the same place of worship as herself, and she professed to be a 'Protestant Nonconformist.' I have Mrs. Barrington's letter in my housekeeping desk at this very moment."

"I know Mrs. Barrington *professed* to be of our communion—at any rate to be of the same way of thinking as ourselves. And one day I asked Susanna what place of worship she and her former mistress attended, and if they were regular 'joined members.' And she made answer that they were not properly *enrolled* members, because Mrs. Barrington was always on the point of leaving England. She did not think she was down on the church-books herself, but she could not be positive. The place they always attended was *Quebec Chapel*."

"Quebec Chapel! But that is an Episcopalian place of worship. Nonconformists have neither part nor lot in it, nor ever had. It belongs, and always has belonged, to the Establishment."

"So I told Susanna, ma'am, and she seemed quite startled and taken aback; and when she had a little recovered her composure, she excused herself for having made such a stupid mistake, but supposed she had forgotten the exact name of the chapel; she had the most treacherous memory in the world, and was always making senseless blunders."

"That is a blunder so extraordinary that I cannot comprehend any person actually committing it. Those regularly attending Quebec Chapel *must* know that its principles are

those of the State Church, just as you know perfectly well that our orders and worship are *not* those of the Establishment. Only very uninformed and perfectly irreligious persons, or quite young children, are supposed to be in utter ignorance of the denominational character of the Church to which they belong."

"I should say every grown man and woman—especially such as have joined in communion—*must* know really what they profess themselves to be. And unless Susanna South was what is commonly called by the world a *Churchwoman*, I don't see how she could fall into such a curious mistake."

"And I do not see how, as a so-called 'Churchwoman,' she could ever imagine that she was attending a Dissenting chapel. Do you know, Nurse, I am rather afraid that the whole story is untrue?"

"Well, ma'am, the thought has crossed my mind that, in downright reality, she is—*nothing at all*! Now, if she actually were—what she affirms she is *not*—a member of the Church of England, she might make a muddle of the saints—there are such lots of them!—and say she went to St. Matthew's Church, when all the while she went to St. Luke's; or she might fancy she heard the bells of St. John's or St. Thomas's chiming or clanging over her head when she stood in the porch, of a Sunday morning; while, in fact, she heard some other saint's bells a-ringing. But a *sound Dissenter*—such as Susanna South professes herself to be, and such as Mrs. Barrington, according to account, really was—could never make the curious mistake."

"I do not see how it is possible. And this is no question of conviction, nor has it aught to do with differing creeds or principles; it is simply a matter of common sense, of ordinary discrimination. And to what communion did the 'sainted Lady Selina' belong, I wonder?"

"We could not make out exactly, ma'am; at first it seemed as if her sainted ladyship, who was so much like our own Miss Queenie, was a thoroughgoing Nonconformist, the same as ourselves; but when we could not clearly understand sundry little things, Susanna had to alter her

story, and admit that Lady Selina Severn was a good Roman Catholic."

"But, really, if Susanna herself is not a Dissenter, what becomes of Mrs. Barrington's testimonials?"

"That is what I ask myself sometimes, ma'am."

"I think, Nurse—late in the day as it is—I shall summon up courage to call upon Mrs. Barrington."

"But, begging your pardon, ma'am, that's just what you cannot do; for Mrs. Barrington is supposed to be somewhere on the other side the Channel. Nobody quite knows where; first of all she goes to Paris, and then to Orleans, and then to Lyons. I almost think she was at Nice or Cannes the last we heard of her."

"Has she quite given up her establishment in London?"

"Such establishment as she had was given up, without a doubt, ma'am. But she was in 'apartments' just at the last, Susanna tells us, and whether she lived in Brook Street or Upper Brook Street, we cannot be quite certain."

"Brook Street only was the address given. I was reading over Mrs. Barrington's letter no later than last evening. Well, Nurse, having our suspicions a little raised, we must keep our wits well about us. Perhaps, after all, we do the poor girl some injustice; perhaps she is rather untruthful; perhaps not quite frank in her account of herself; perhaps—! But it is of no use to multiply perhapses; I think I had better have a few words with Susanna myself. The doubt once suggested, I shall not find it easy to leave the *dénouement*—that is, the explanation of contradictory statements, &c.—to the chapter of accidents. Now let us talk of something more edifying than Susanna South."

"With all my heart, ma'am. And I hope I have not exceeded my duty in saying what I have said. It is a cruel, wicked thing to excite prejudice in the mind of employers against a fellow-servant, especially if there be not the strongest reason."

"I think, as the oldest domestic in our house, Nurse—quite as much our friend as our servant—you could not have done otherwise than mention the inconsistencies—to

use no stronger term—that you have noticed. But now let us have some reading. Shall we have our regular chapters?"

"If you please, ma'am ; I'll try to put Susanna out of my head to-night."

When they had finished, Nurse asked if she might have the "Life of Mrs. Schimmelpenninck" for a little while. She had read something about it in a magazine. It was a new book, just out, and if her mistress had quite done with it, she would so much like to be allowed to take it to her own room.

"Of course, you can have it," returned Mrs. Osborne. "Your master, and I, and Miss Dolly have all read it. There was some talk about lending it to Mrs. Derrington, but I think you ought to have the first chance ; only I must ask you to get through it at once, for it is as good as promised to several of our friends."

"Thank you, ma'am ; I'll fetch it now, if I may. There is a little time left before they come back from church. Is it in your room, ma'am ?"

"No ; it is in the little room off the landing, that we are using as a book-closet just now—the room that used to be your master's dressing-room, before the alterations were made."

"Thank you, ma'am."

And away went Nurse in search of the desired volume. She was so long away that Chrissie wondered whether any one had taken it from the shelves, where she had lodged it herself. At last she returned, but without the "Life of Mrs. Schimmelpenninck."

"Cannot you find it, Nurse?" asked Mrs. Osborne, scarcely looking up from her own book.

"No, ma'am," gasped Nurse ; "I didn't look for it—I didn't. I found something else ! Oh, how shall I tell you ! Oh, what *does* it mean ?"

"What is the matter ? What did you find ?" asked Chrissie, fairly startled. The poor old woman was shaking in every limb, and scarcely able to speak. "You look as if you had seen a ghost ! *What was it ?*"

"No ; no ghost ! Something much worse than a ghost—and the something must mean harm. Try not to be

frightened, ma'am ; but there's somebody besides ourselves in the house."

"Where is Susanna ?"

For Chrissie's first idea was that Susanna might have been surprised, in her solitude, on the other side of the house, where no one else was, and perhaps murdered.

"I don't know anything about Susanna. I only went to the book-closet, and just as I got near the door, some one glided out. There was just light enough on the landing to know the person, and it was—it was——"

"Who, Nurse ? Speak at once."

But it was not quite so easy to obey. Nurse's teeth chattered, and her heart beat so violently, she could not, on the instant, reply. It so happened that a glass of wine, half-emptied, had been left standing on the mantelpiece ; without hesitation she seized it, and drank it off. Her next movement was to return to the door by which she had just entered, and lock it securely ; then she drew a bolt which would prevent access to the back drawing-room, and then she whispered, "It was Count Stanger. Him who was here on Thursday night, and dancing with my young lady !"

"Count Stanger ! But what does he here ? and who let him in ?"

"I don't know, ma'am. I haven't heard any bell ring. All has been still as death since Master and Miss Queenie went away."

"And was the front door fastened ?"

"I fastened it with my own hands, drew the top bolt, and put up the chain. What shall we do ? Shall I call Susanna ?"

But how to act for the best neither mistress nor servant could determine. Clearly Count Stanger could be there for no good ; he had no business in the house whatever. He had certainly paid marked attention to Queenie on the night of the ball ; was he making an attempt to see her clandestinely ? But surely he would not come on Sunday evening, when it was well known the family never received. Besides, he came by stealth—or so, at least, it seemed. What *ought* these women to do ? and where was Susanna ?

"Are you quite sure it was Count Stanger ?" asked

Chrissie, after the two had looked at each other in silence for a few moments.

"Positive, ma'am. And he had on a sort of veil—just a piece of thin crape—that had fallen off his face, I suppose; it was about his shoulders. And I should say he had no boots on, or only list slippers, for he passed out of sight without a sound. If a ghost ever walks, it must walk like he did."

"Did he see you? Did either of you speak?"

"He must have seen me, and heard me, too, for I exclaimed quite loud enough for him to hear. I should have screamed out loud, only I thought of you in the drawing-room, and feared you might come running out to see what was the matter. So I didn't enter the closet; I did not even turn up the gas on the landing, but came back as fast as my limbs would carry me. Oh, when will the gentlemen be home?"

"Not just yet, I fear; I heard the church clock striking eight while you were out of the room. I was surprised to hear it so distinctly; the wind must be due east."

And then Mrs. Osborne and Nurse sat down and listened breathlessly, but all was perfect stillness within the house and without. What could they do, but wait till Mr. Osborne and Philip arrived, which they would probably do about half-past eight. For the moment they were safe, Chrissie felt; if the doors were tried, she and Nurse would do their utmost to barricade them, so as to gain time till succour came. Should they rush out and set off the great alarm bell, that would certainly call all neighbours as well as passers-by; and when once started, ring itself down without fail? And if there were thieves in the house they must be disturbed, and would probably take to flight.

But adventure themselves beyond that locked, and bolted, and well-lighted room, they dared not. They had not the courage—it might be the rashness—to leave their refuge. They had no alternative but to wait, and hope devoutly that there would be no attack upon the fastened doors.

"Only, we may as well light up the other room," said Chrissie, passing through the folding-doors, with the match-box in her hand; "it is better to be in the full light than in

this semi-darkness. If we have anything to do, it will be easier to do it with the gas blazing front and back, and it gives one confidence."

With trembling hands Chrissie drew down the gaselier, with its five large burners, and lit them up every one; there were branches over the mantelpiece, and she lit them too. Fortunately, there was a small ornamental match-box in the room, so there was no trouble of manufacturing spills; and they listened and listened—it seemed to them for half the evening, so long a time they fancied had elapsed since Nurse came back to the drawing-room with the startling tidings, and since the doors had been securely locked.

"It must have struck nine without one hearing it," said Nurse in despair, as the minutes slowly passed, and there was no return from church. Chrissie pointed silently to the ornamental timepiece on the mantelboard—it still went tick! tick! tick! the half-hour had sounded without their noting the recurrence of the familiar sound—that was all. It was rather more than five-and-twenty minutes to nine.

At last, in the dead stillness, footsteps could be heard on the drive outside—welcome footsteps, for they were accompanied by well-known voices. "There's master!" exclaimed Nurse, joyfully.

"That's Philip's voice," responded Chrissie; "thank God! they are back. But, oh God! grant the house may not be full of unscrupulous men! They are but two; and the girls will be powerless. Why does not the bell ring?"

But the next moment loud voices were to be heard below, then rapid footsteps ascended the staircase, and the handle of the door was quickly turned.

"Mother! mother! Chrissie!—why are you locked in? What is the matter?" cried out the voice that had been so long and eagerly waited for. And then Mrs. Osborne withdrew the little bolt and turned back the key to admit her husband. Philip was not with him, but the girls were close behind.

"Where is Philip?" asked Chrissie, anxiously.

"Why, gone to see who can be in the house! Do

you know that we found the front door wide open, and yet I heard Nurse draw up the chain as we went down the steps?"

"I made all secure before I came up to mistress—every door and window was fast," interposed Nurse.

"Yet, for all that, the house was open—wide open to the night. I must go and see what is up, for most decidedly there must be somebody about who has no business here. There may be half-a-dozen somebodies for aught we know; I'll go and get my revolver; Philip has gone to fetch his."

"Stop one instant, there *is* some one in the house. Nurse saw Count Stanger coming out of the book-closet half-an-hour ago."

"Count Stanger, Queenie! what does it mean?"

"I don't know; indeed I don't know," gasped Queenie, with a half-sob, and turning at the same time deathly pale. "It *cannot* be the Count; he is miles away in Scotland. It must be somebody like him; you made a mistake, Nurse."

"No, Miss Queenie, I did not; I saw him as distinctly as I see you at this minute. He was rather disguised, but I should have known him anywhere; and he wore on his little finger the identical ring we all noticed the other night. Cook said it was a 'cat's eye,' or something of the sort."

Queenie waxed paler and paler. It was no vision she had had, then, out on the dreary Common; for one half minute she had seen with her own eyes the man who had paid his court so gallantly, whose name could not be found in the *Almanach de Gotha*—whose cause she had, nevertheless, so warmly espoused. The man, too, who was probably no Count, but a professed burglar! The full conviction flashed upon her mind in less time than it would take to write it, or to say it. Suppose he were to be taken—taken and tried for robbery? Oh; why did not the earth open and swallow her up! At that moment she would have welcomed almost any fate, coward as she was. If she did not ask Heaven for instant death, she implored total unconsciousness.

But unconsciousness did not come at her call ; she stood as if rooted to the spot, as if paralysed, but in full possession of all her senses, and with a flood of light pouring in upon her shuddering, reluctant mind—light that could not, would not, be excluded. Like one in a dreadful dream, she saw Dolly on the landing outside, turning on all the gas-jets within reach ; her father left the room, followed by Annie Derrington. Her mother rose, but sank back, trembling, and unable to pass the threshold.

In another minute there was the sound of many voices, or so it seemed to her—loud, passionate voices ; and, above them all, her brother Philip's. Then the sharp report of a pistol—then another—then wild confusion, and a headlong retreat to the ground-floor. Last of all the violent slamming of the heavy hall-door—and all was still. The unconsciousness for which Queenie had longed in vain came mercifully to her mother, who sank back in a dead faint ; for that either husband or son had fallen by the hands of the marauders, whoever they might be, she felt not any doubt. And while poor old Nurse—herself on the brink of insensibility—called for water, and tried to chafe her mistress's hands, the great alarm-bell commenced its awful pealing. Annie, knowing the nearest spot where the machinery could be reached and set in motion, had flown to liberate the spring ; and now it was rousing the whole neighbourhood.

To Queenie's immense relief, her father and Philip both made their appearance in the room at that moment, and both unhurt. Though Philip's face was blackened by the discharge which had only just passed him by, Mr. Osborne was untouched.

"It was that villain Stanger !" exclaimed Philip, as he pushed back his hair ; "he only just missed me ; the bullet must be in the banister. You are not hurt, father ?"

"No, thank God, we are all safe, though sorely discomposed ; but mother, there, seems the worse for the attack. Ah ! here are the maids—look to your mistress, girls. We shall have the police here presently, and all our neighbours, to know whether it is fire or thieves ! Plucky little Annie set the bell going, and now it *must* run down."

And almost on the instant there were sounds of many feet, and again the front door was opened and a number of people admitted. Among them several policemen, who were eager to search the house, as soon as they caught the word "robbers !" Philip went with them ; Mr. Osborne went, too, accompanied by several of his neighbours. In a few minutes the pealing of the great bell ceased ; Chrissie began to recover her senses ; Annie and Dolly were still absent. Queenie remained, as if petrified, not offering to move or aid Nurse, who was tremulously assisting her mistress. She longed to escape from the room, yet dared not venture. Oh, why could not Dolly return, and bring some tidings of what had actually transpired ? Were the robbers all gone ? Had the whole gang escaped ? or would any one be taken into custody ?

After awhile, Queenie heard many voices below in the hall, the whole party had returned from the search, and it seemed to be generally agreed that all had escaped, and that the house was cleared of its unwelcome intruders. Then they went into the dining-room, and the loud tones were less distinct, though still most audible. Queenie summoned up her courage, and trembling in every limb, ventured on to the landing, and tried to hear what went on below. Her lover's name smote upon her ears ; then Susanna South's. She crept down a few steps, to a lower landing, to the head of the stairs leading directly into the hall. And thence, through the banisters, she could not only hear, but see, all that went on in the brightly-lighted dining-room. The door was standing wide open ; the room was full of people—friends, neighbours, passers-by returning from the different churches, servants, and policemen.

And as Queenie listened, she heard, "That Count Stanger must be the very man we are wanting ! We all but tracked him at Brighton ; but he gave us the slip. Well, I hope we've got a clue, anyhow."

And then something was said that gave Queenie to understand that two of the officers were already in pursuit of "Stanger."

"Well, I hope they'll capture him, without more ado,"

said Mr. Osborne. "Do you know whether the fellow is a ticket-of-leave man?"

"I don't think he is, exactly; and yet I cannot be quite sure till I know precisely who he is. He wasn't Count Stanger at Brighton, he was something else; of course he has a dozen *aliases*. And as for that 'Susanna South,' I dare say we know her very well. If she is who I suspect she is, the Sergeant there can identify her in a twinkling."

So Queenie gathered that "Susanna" would not be in readiness to attend her mistress that night, on her retirement. She had disappeared incontinently, together with several other persons, whom it would not be so easy to identify. Was it possible that she and the *pseudo* Count Stanger were accomplices?—staunch friends and allies, perhaps? It was not only possible, she was afraid; every word uttered below confirmed her suspicions—it was but too probable. The false Count and the incomparable waiting-woman were evidently in collusion, and, all unsuspected, had played into each other's hands.

Poor Queenie sank down at last on the stairs, and sobbed bitterly. Never again could she lift up her head; never refer to that unhappy entertainment; never confess how entirely she had been deceived, deluded, humiliated! And the Harcourts would hear of it, and Adelaide would triumph; and what would Florence L'Estrange say? "I told you he was not what he claimed to be, Queenie; there is no Prince of Kalitzky, no Count Adolphe Stanger! He is a rank impostor."

Then Queenie heard: "I have very good reason to believe he was valet to a nobleman a year or two back; and if I am right about Miss Susanna South, she is his lawful wife; he is married, anyhow. He always passes as somebody wonderfully grand, and he boasts of having gulled nobody knows how many young ladies of position. But, Mr. Osborne, it is full time we made a memorandum of what is missing. Shall we go through the rooms again? There is no time to be lost in these cases, especially if you want to recover your property?"

Then there was a little confusion of talk, and the unhappy listener on the stairs failed to comprehend what was going

on in the dining-room ; and some one pushed the door almost to, while at the same time all voices were lowered. A sudden thought struck her : those men must not come out and find her eaves-dropping, as it were ; to say the least, it would be undignified. Suppose she were required to give evidence against the so-called Count !

In another minute they would be on the stairs, and escape would be barely possible. Queenie rose, and sped up to her natural shelter—her own room, which she had left so contentedly three hours before. As she entered it, she stood amazed and confounded. All her drawers had been turned out—emptied on to the floor. Her wardrobe had been ransacked ; trinket-cases, and valueless ornaments were scattered about in wildest confusion ; nothing that was comparatively worthless had been removed ; all that was of actual value had been swept away. She touched the cabinet doors ; they were still locked, and she turned to look for the key, which she had placed that very afternoon in a secret place. Eagerly she examined her vaunted “strong-box,” and at once she stood aghast, motionless, and speechless.

She heard the search-party coming upstairs ; they were just outside the door, but she never moved. Her father was the first to enter. When Queenie saw him her tongue was loosened, and, with an exceeding bitter cry, she wailed out, “Oh, my sapphires ! Oh, my pearls ! Oh, *all* my lovely things !”



CHAPTER XXIII.

INCONSOLABLE.

WHETHER to regret the more deeply her vanished pearls or her matchless sapphires, Queenie could not determine. Her pearls were “pearls of price,” and of more intrinsic value than she had at all suspected ; but her

cherished sapphires were *heirlooms*—or she chose to consider them as such, as they had actually reverted to her from a venerable relative, who could very properly be described as an “ancestress,” and were quite intended to descend in due season to her own posterity; for that daughters, grand-daughters, and great grand-daughters would in proper course of time be born to her she had little, if any, doubt. She always pictured herself as living to a ripe old age, with her splendid constitution, and with the full vitality which she had been always assured that she possessed. What was to hinder her from emulating the renowned longevity of Aunt Jemima? Mrs. Marmaduke Merridew had expired in her hundred-and-third year; she might have lived to her hundred and thirty-third birthday had she not so imprudently exhausted her remaining powers in one tremendous effort.

All was confusion at “The Acacias” till long past midnight; and next morning it was not an atom better, for all Scotland Yard—or so it seemed to the unfortunate Osbornes—arrived for the express purpose of investigating the mysterious robbery which had been so skilfully planned and so successfully accomplished. Friends and neighbours too, appeared by the dozen; policemen pervaded the whole house, and the servants, on the whole, conscious of being entirely above suspicion, had a rather enjoyable time of it.

Miss Osborne, however, found not the smallest consolation from anything that transpired. Not only had she lost her jewels and her handsome furs, but she had lost her *heart*, as she assured herself over and again all through the weary, wakeful hours of that ever memorable night. She was wounded indeed—wounded to the death, she believed, in her most vulnerable part; she had been stabbed to the heart, ruthlessly wounded in her affections—deceived, betrayed, mocked! Could she ever trust again? Would she ever be able to listen to the honied accents of a lover more? And not the least part of her suffering was caused by the humiliating fact of her discomfiture being known to all her friends. Everybody comprehended how entirely she had been deluded—how thoroughly tricked; and before many hours had passed, there would appear in

the newspapers absurd and groundless reports, and utterly untrue accounts of the "Clapham Burglary," or, perhaps, "Mystery," as it would soon be called. But the less the mystery was unravelled the better Queenie would be pleased; to figure as the heroine of *such* an adventure was the very last thing she could possibly desire.

She had had her *mauvais quart d'heure* on the stairs, while she listened to the outspoken comments of the little congregation assembled in the dining-room; and she had writhed when her father and Philip insisted on making searching inquiries, which she sought, but fruitlessly, to evade. But all that had gone before was as nothing to what remained; for during the afternoon of Monday, just as it was getting dark, and she doing her best to secure a few moments of repose, Dolly came on tiptoe into her room, and at once awakened her.

"Oh, Dolly!—you cruel Dolly! and I was just losing myself in forgetfulness! I told you I would try to go to sleep when the dusk fell. How *could* you be so inconsiderate—so very unkind?" exclaimed Miss Osborne, reproachfully.

"Dearie, I had no choice but to disturb you," replied Dolly. "I am very sorry, but there is no help for it; you are wanted in the library."

"Who wants me? I am too ill to be worried; tell my father so."

"Your father would have saved you all trouble, if he could have done it, be sure, dear; but there is some one from Scotland Yard, who says he must ask you a few questions, and that without loss of time."

"What do I care about Scotland Yard?" said Queenie, peevishly. "If they are not clever enough to find the jewels for themselves, I am sure I cannot help them. I suppose they are going to do what they can to collect 'evidence'—the police are so intensely stupid! Go away, Dolly, I want to be quiet; I am not going to be tormented by dullards from Scotland Yard."

"But this man is not supposed to be a dullard; he is not a common policeman. He is evidently a person in authority, and he says no one, save yourself, can answer the questions he will have to put."

"Oh dear, oh dear! I wish—I don't know what I wish, Dolly! I wish we had never given this stupid birthday ball. I wish all that has happened since were an ugly dream, from which I was beginning to awake. Don't you see I am in my dressing-gown, and I am dead sleepy? Hand me anything that comes first; I shall not make a toilet in honour of a policeman."

And so it came to pass that Miss Osborne, for once, presented herself in a negligent and unbecoming array; she made so slovenly a figure that the gentleman from Scotland Yard was not so much impressed as he might have been under more favourable circumstances. She felt very uncomfortable as she seated herself at her father's side, and felt then the keen scrutiny of the official directed to herself. She was somewhat re-assured, however, when questions—very simple questions—began to be put; and nothing at all partaking of the nature of *an oath* was demanded.

Her name and age given, and the date of the robbery being recorded, Queenie was asked by this person, who looked her full in the face, as if she were a witness under examination in a Court of Justice, "When, and where, did you first meet with the man whom you have been accustomed to call *Count Stanger*?"

The exact date Queenie could not furnish; the introduction took place at a ball which she attended, with her parents' consent, and *chaperoned* by the mother of her friend, Florence L'Estrange—Miss L'Estrange having first encountered the individual in question at the *table d'hôte* of a certain hotel at Buxton.

The official—he had quite the appearance of a gentleman—silently assented, and, at the same moment, made a record of the fact. Queenie's heart misgave her terribly, lest the affair should come to a public trial, and Florence L'Estrange be subpoenaed to make her appearance in the witness-box, for she was by no means satisfied as to the discretion of her bosom friend. Who could tell how far an examination, perhaps a *cross-examination*, would be pushed? and Flo, when once put upon her mettle, was apt to be tiresomely explicit. Queenie remembered with a shudder the damaging revelations that were not unfrequently forced from a

reluctant witness; and she had spoken so unreservedly—so unwisely to Florence. And then, how much had Susanna South overheard of that midnight conversation to which she had been an unsuspected listener? How could she guess that the words spoken in confidence, and in a moment of excitement, were ever likely to be repeated to a censorious world! Would it not be well to condone, without more ado, the outrage committed? Might not the charge be withdrawn, the wretched matter be summarily suppressed?

But then, if the *pesudo* Count and his confederates were suffered to decamp with their ill-gotten booty, if no further attempt was made to punish them, how could she ever hope to recover the treasures of which she had been so cruelly bereft?

And while she hesitated as to the course she should herself pursue, the grave functionary from Scotland Yard resumed his inquiries, "Am I to understand, Miss Osborne, that Stanger had the presumption to declare himself your lover?"

Queenie, who had actually received an engagement-ring from the audacious Stanger, and had worn it till within the last few hours, trusting that it would escape the parental regard, hesitated in her reply. "He appeared to be very much impressed," she answered, nervously; "he professed to be my admirer."

"May I ask, if you favoured him with any encouragement?"

"Well, yes, to some extent; that is"—stammered Queenie, wishing secretly that the disguised burglar had not been favoured with quite so much encouragement as he had undoubtedly received. It is quite allowable to kiss your accepted lover, certainly; but you should carefully abstain from elevating a gentleman to that enviable position till you are perfectly sure of his antecedents, and his credentials—if he have any. Also, it should never be forgotten that a lover, who seeks to elude the notice of a young lady's natural guardians, can never be quite honourable, or at all worthy of her confidence. Queenie was by this time quite convinced that she had acted with extreme indiscretion, and

she would have given much to recall the admissions of the last few weeks, not to speak of the last two or three days. To make the best of it, she had acted so foolishly as to draw down upon herself any amount of censure and ridicule, to subject herself to unkind and injurious comments of all kinds. The very least she could expect was to become a jest among her friends and acquaintances ; she would excite their laughter, and there was nothing she so much deprecated as being laughed at, and made the butt of general scorn and derision. Even kind people would always speak of her now as "that poor, silly, credulous Miss Osborne, who could neither keep her jewels nor discriminate between a gentleman and a skilled burglar !" Some might go so far as to declare that she had only got precisely what she deserved. She felt just then that she could never go to church—that is to say, her own beloved church—any more ; she could never face any kind of public gathering, never appear at ball, or concert, or festival entertainment ; never enjoy herself at any seaside resort, lest she should be recognised, and pointed out as the foolish girl who had allowed her vanity to draw her into a clandestine engagement with a robber !

If it came to a public trial, she was quite sure that she should die of sheer humiliation and shame ; for, though she had in no wise committed herself, she could not but be conscious of her flagrant folly and headstrong wilfulness ; and folly and obstinacy invariably result in something very like disgrace. And the obnoxious official persisted in questioning the luckless girl, whose every answer was fain to criminate herself as a daughter, and as a discreet maiden of good position. The catechism went on till she could bear it no longer, till, bursting into passionate tears, she reproached her father with suffering her to be so harshly treated, declaring that she would not answer another question, even though she never possessed a sapphire or a pearl of her own again.

And Jonathan Osborne, touched by his weak darling's distress, interposed, and begged the official to desist from his examination there and then. To which the individual, closing his note-book, replied, "Certainly, certainly ! I

will cause the young lady no further vexation ; she has been extremely silly, and that is all. Let us hope that she will grow wiser, for she is little better than a child now. Her friends must take care of her, lest she become the prey of some other unprincipled, designing cheat ; a girl of seventeen ought to be more entirely under the control of her parents and her governess ; she ought, in fact, to be still in the schoolroom. Miss Osborne, you have had a lesson you will not easily forget ; let us hope that for the future you will be far less credulous, far less open to the flatteries of so obvious a deceiver. Experience is always dearly bought ; but, in coming years, you may be devoutly thankful that so painful and expensive a lesson was permitted to you. I do not think I need trouble you any longer, the more so as your confessions are worthless as condemnatory evidence, whether we succeed in tracing the worthless fellow or not."

"Do you think it will be possible in any way to regain the jewels?" asked Queenie, hurriedly, and, at the same time, evidently relieved.

"That I cannot say ; we have a clue undoubtedly ; but a clue too often leads up to nothing satisfactory. Your waiting-maid was certainly Stanger's accomplice, and entered your service for no other purpose than to play into the hands of her confederate, lover, or husband, whichever he might be. From certain information that I have received, it seems to me that Susanna South, as she chose to call herself, was actually the wedded wife of the principal criminal."

"Then Stanger was really a married man, and had no right to make proposals to any one?"

"Certainly not ; a little deception, more or less, is of small account with a man of Stanger's unprincipled character. Be thankful, young lady, that the imposition was of so short duration. You were so easily practised upon, you lent so willing an ear to the flatteries of an arch-deceiver, that it is impossible to tell how far the heartless villain might have succeeded with you, had he not been content with your jewels only. A little more persistent cunning on his part, a little more credulity on yours, and there is no

saying to what extent you might have been hopelessly compromised. Take my advice, Miss Osborne, and never listen to a lover who seeks to persuade you to disobedience to your parents, who would draw you into an entanglement, from which it may not be quite so easy to release yourself as in the present instance."

Humbled and penitent, Queenie had not the spirit for any rejoinder. She felt, ill, too, and quite unequal to any justification of herself. From one cause or another she had been agitated unceasingly ever since the opening of the ball on that eventful Thursday evening, and she longed for sympathy, and shrank more and more from the severe criticisms which she had so thoughtlessly provoked.

"You may withdraw now, Queenie, if you choose," said Mr. Osborne, more than willing to spare his erring daughter any further mortification. "Mr. Spenser and I have still a few more arrangements to make, to which I dare say you do not care to listen. We will do our best to recover your sapphires, my dear;—I think it is quite probable you may have them in your own possession again before very long. Now leave us, if you please."

Without any reluctance, crestfallen Queenie withdrew, only venturing to whisper to her father as she left the room, "I would rather no more fuss were made about the robbery. I think I would rather give up the jewels for ever than become the talk of London. Let me hear no more about it."

But Mr. Osborne replied, sternly for him, "I cannot accede to your request, Queenie; my duty to society compels me to pursue this daring criminal, who has committed an offence not only against you and me, but against the world. The affair cannot be condoned—it has passed out of my hands; besides, if after all that has transpired, I were known to withdraw from the prosecution, rumours not at all to your credit might very possibly be noised abroad. No! child; the law *must* take its course; for the sake of others, this unfortunate man must not be allowed to escape."

Sadly enough Queenie went back to her own room, meditating on her unprecedented misfortunes. She was not sorry to find Dolly still there, for she needed somebody to whom she could freely open her mind.

"No ; I cannot try to go to sleep again," she said, as Dolly commenced to prepare the pillows for her. "Stir up the fire, for I am wretchedly cold, and none the better for my interview with this most impertinent policeman."

"I scarcely think he is a policeman, dear. Did he annoy you very much ?"

"Very much, indeed ; though I suppose he really asked no questions that were not to the point. Still, it was horrible to have to listen to the remarks—the uncalled-for remarks—and opinions of an utter stranger ; a person whom I never saw before, and whom I sincerely trust I shall never see again. Oh, Dolly, I have been cruelly deceived !"

"My poor dear, that you have ! Don't sob so, Queenie, darling ; it might have been worse, you know. The jewels *may* be recovered, and, after all, they are only senseless stones, and are not actually necessary to your happiness. You will get over it some day—you will forget your loss, and—and—surely you do not regret the discovery of that wicked man's treachery ?"

"No, I don't ; at least, I think not ; but it is all so sudden—such a dreadful, dreadful shock ! Oh, Dolly, he made such professions ! and he promised me every kind of delightful satisfaction. You know, I worshipped rank and high degree—I always hoped that one day I might wear a coronet ; to be a countess seemed to be all that I could desire ; and when he told me that I should almost certainly become a *Princess*, I was just enraptured."

"But, my darling, how could you believe such an absurd story ? Princes, and the heirs of princes, do not go about the world in disguise in these days—and who ever heard of a Prince of Karpathia ?"

"But Florence was deceived as well as myself. She quite believed that the pretended Count was a relative of the Countess Bertha. I am sure at first she extremely admired poor Stanger ; and so did Adelaide Harcourt ; it was not till they both discovered his decided partiality for me that they began to doubt him."

"Queenie, for Heaven's sake don't talk about that wretch as if you pitied him ; and his partiality was for your jewels, not at all for yourself—of that you must be

perfectly convinced. If he could have secured the coveted treasure without your help, be sure he would never have taken the trouble to profess himself your devoted lover. Be thankful that he carried the treachery no further than he did. Your mother says, 'Thank God, he cared *but* for the jewels !' "

" Ah, Dolly ! it is all very well for my mother and for you to thank God ! You do not know—you can never guess—the bitterness of my heart, for I *did* care for him—I cared for him far more than I guessed. Ah ! how handsome he was ; how clever, how brilliant, how captivating ! What a pity that, after all, he was not a person of rank !—if he had only been a Prince, or even a real Count, I would have gone with him to the end of the world. At least, I think I would."

" No, Queenie, you would not ; poverty, however well-connected, would never have charms for you. Why, you were caring for a myth, that was about as unreal as the fairy princes of our nursery days. The man who called himself Count Stanger was not a reality in any sense ; he was utterly false—a hollow sham, without a single redeeming point in his favour. And when you are tempted to bestow upon him one sigh of regret, do not forget that he was no more your lover than he was mine. He was no one's lover ; he was, as we have every reason to believe, Susanna's lawful husband."

" If that, indeed, be a fact—and I suppose there is no mistake about it—I shall hate and detest them both. Oh ! how abominably I have been treated—when I think about it I feel as if I should die of my cruel wrongs. The world must be full of false, shameless people, who care only to serve themselves at any price, quite careless of the feelings of others. Ah ! how kind I was to that good-for-nothing creature, when she was imposing upon me all the while. I dare say there was no Lady Selina Severn—of sainted memory ! "

" There never was, Queenie ; there is no actual record of any such personage. Why, even the servants did not believe in her existence. Every one in the house had ceased to believe in Susanna. Had she remained your attendant a

few hours longer, I feel pretty sure her real character must have been exposed. The farce was carried on to the last possible moment."

"Where did she come from?"

"Ah! that is what we have all wanted to know. Of course, Mrs. Barrington was as purely an imaginary personage as Lady Selina. The mother blames herself severely for having allowed you to engage a maid on the mere authority of a written character; she never made such a mistake before, and I think she never will again."

"You would infer then that the letter I was supposed to receive from Mrs. Barrington was a *forged* document?"

"I am afraid there is not much doubt about that, my dear."

"Who forged it?"

"That no one knows; perhaps no one will ever know, save those who are in the disgraceful secret. Queenie, dear, don't weep so pitifully; we have all been a little more credulous than we should have been—let us act more sensibly for the future. I only regret that I kept silence as long as I did, for I suspected Susanna South from the first day of her residence here; and Annie advised me to speak out without more ado, for she had the strongest suspicions that your maid was an impostor."

"An impostor, indeed! She was a veritable *serpent*! But I am not sure that it would have been of any use to warn me. I had no doubt of her—or of *him*—till Friday evening. I would not own it; but I confess—to you—that the unsatisfactory examination of the *Almanach de Gotha* did startle me from my pleasant dream of security. I saw, too, that father and Philip were both against him; and presently I discovered that Florence had lost all faith in his story, and was determined to test his veracity. Simpleton that I was, I would not be persuaded. I implored her to defer her letter to her aunt's friend, the Countess Bertha of Behrenstadt, for Stanger had protested that any premature disclosures of his attachment might, and probably would, prove fatal to our happiness. Then I told you how Susanna frightened us by making a noise after midnight in the next room, where she pretended to be looking for the *nervine*,

and the most horrible suspicions took possession of me, and would not be dismissed from my mind. All at once it dawned upon me that Susanna was insincere : she had told obvious falsehoods ever since her service commenced, and I was almost sick of ' Lady Selina ' before I began to suspect her reality. I felt very miserable and uneasy all day yesterday—I could scarcely control myself as we were walking home from church after the morning service. But the worst was last night, as we were crossing the Common. I did not tell you what a shock I had ; I meant to do so when I had an opportunity, but no opportunity ever came ; the plunderers were in the house when we returned to it, and all was wild confusion. Dolly, I felt, as if the solid earth had opened beneath my feet—I shall never be at peace again ; my happiness is wrecked for ever in this world."

"I hope not, dearest—I think all will come right again, presently ; but you cannot expect to be otherwise than dreadfully disturbed, just yet. Something shocked you, you say—had you any hint of what might be on the eve of transpiring ?"

"No ; and yet I was startled—and half-inclined to plead sudden indisposition—which would not have been an untruth ; and ask my father to take me back to mother and nurse. I knew Susanna was at home ; but I thought nothing of her—I had forgotten her, I believe."

And then Queenie gave a full and particular account of the scare she had received at one particular corner of the cross-road ; and declared, too, that in that moment the scales fell from her eyes, and the horrible truth was flashed upon her. "Count Stanger" was no count !—no gentleman—only a talented, plausible adventurer, who, if he had lived a century earlier, would be most likely to hang in chains on the gallows.

"Oh, Dolly," she continued, "don't you wonder I am alive ? I was all but distracted as we sat in church ; I could not listen to prayers, or lessons, or singing ! I haven't any idea what the sermon was about ; if there had been none it would have been all one to me. I sat there, almost too agitated to keep still—I wonder I did not go mad. You all talked, as we walked back, as if you had

enjoyed the service ; I was only feverishly anxious to be at home—I could not properly understand what you were saying ! Then there was the hall-door wide open, and no sign of any one downstairs. Philip ran for his revolver, feeling certain, as he said, that ‘something wrong had happened !’ I could not guess what, and yet my heart misgave me ; I felt like death as I followed father up to the drawing-room, and found that mother and nurse had locked themselves in. You know all that happened Dolly,—how Nurse said she had seen Stanger, with crape about his face, and I—in sheer desperation—contradicted her, though I knew it was the truth, for I had seen him on the Common, and I could perceive that he was, to a certain extent, disguised, for the light of the lamp fell for an instant full upon him. Then father turned to me, and questioned me ; of course everybody knew that he was supposed to be here, on my account ; and even as father asked what it all meant, I understood what was taking place. I knew, as well as if it had all been shown to me beforehand, that Stanger was here for ill and not for good ; for plunder and not for love ; for the jewels, and for anything else he could appropriate, not for *me* ! He never wanted to see me again ! I am not sure that he did see me on the Common ; perhaps he would have killed me, if I had come in his way in one of the corridors. He did try to kill Philip—he fired at him, you know ? ”

“Yes,” responded Dolly, with a shudder. “Thank God the aim was bad ; the bullet was found this morning in the bath-room door. No one can guess what might have followed—for, doubtless, *all* the chambers of the revolver were loaded—if Annie had not set the alarm-bell ringing. That long, loud peal did excellent service, for the whole gang rushed downstairs, and straightway out of the house.”

“Were there many of them ? ”

“Three or four, Philip says ; but he only saw Stanger, whom he recognised at once, in spite of the crape upon his face.”

“Was Susanna among them ? ”

“Your brother thinks not, but is not certain. Whether she left the house sooner than the men, whom doubtless

she had admitted, no one could determine. Only one thing is certain—she did not remain behind. Inspector Robinson is of opinion that a good deal of the plunder had been removed earlier in the evening—before there was any chance of interruption. You see, Susanna knew the ways of the house, and it was easy for her to arrange so as to be the only servant at home except old Nurse, who was sure to be quietly reading or talking with Mrs. Osborne, according to custom.”

“ Ah, it is all easy enough to understand now—it was all planned from the very first. The plotters were clever, and we were *fools* ! at least, I was. If they, the robbers, had only waited till to-day, I do think they might have been foiled, for we should have been ready for them. Father and Philip were both determined to take steps as soon as Sunday was over ; but for Aunt Jemima’s death they would have bestirred themselves on Saturday. Even I was almost on the alert, and filled with suspicion.”

“ Yes ; and mother had quite made up her mind to interview Susanna the first thing this morning, and if she could not satisfactorily explain certain inconsistencies, dismiss her on the spot. Mother and Nurse talked over her contradictory account of herself while we were away, last night—little dreaming what was going on upstairs and down ! Mother says she came to the conclusion, while Nurse was away hunting for some book, that Susanna was better out of the house than in it ! that it was not really safe to harbour a person under one’s roof, as one of the family, who was not to be absolutely trusted.”

“ Everybody seems to have been awakened to a sense of apprehension just too late. As for myself, I can only suppose that I was bewitched !—under a wicked spell ! There is no other way of accounting for the infatuation—is there ? ”

“ Well, dear, I think I owe it to you to observe that the *spell* laid upon you could never have had any power, had you not been so susceptible to flattery. You take compliments—mere compliments—for actual praise. Yes, dear ; you are very lovely, I know. I never saw any one—not a picture—quite as beautiful as you are. But I think those who love

you best will have better taste than to be always reminding you of the fact."

"You would seem to infer that I am *vain*, Dolly; and perhaps I am. Aunt Rachel, who never compliments one, even if one deserves it, tells me I am *very vain*! She said, only the day after the ball, that my vanity is the rock on which I shall shipwreck my life. It was unkind to say it, was it not? But perhaps there is a spark of truth in the accusation."

"More than a spark, I fear, Queenie, dear. We all have a besetting sin; perhaps vanity, and love of admiration, is yours. You can be on your guard against your weakness, can you not?"

"I don't know," said poor Queenie, sadly. She was very humble, just now. She was so oppressed with the sense of her own folly, that she was quite willing to admit the justice of any accusation. She was so penitent, that she was ready to sit in figurative sackcloth and ashes for her sins, or, rather, for the consequences of them. She cried herself to sleep at last, and once composed to rest, she slumbered soundly till the following morning. She awoke refreshed and calmed, and declared herself quite ready for the breakfast which Dolly had thoughtfully caused to be prepared.



CHAPTER XXIV.

DEAD SEA FRUITS.

THOUGH Miss Osborne was so very much the better for her good night's repose, she still remained languid, and, of course, depressed. She was feverish, too; one hour complaining of burning heat, and the next shivering under counterpanes and blankets. Mr. Grahame, who was called in at once to prescribe for her, simply administered a cooling draught, and recommended as little disturbance as

possible. By his orders, all questions asked were to be instantly answered; curiosity was to be gratified as far as might be; there was to be no appearance of mystery or concealment, *but* the invalid was not to be urged to conversation; no official was, on any account, to be admitted to an interview, and inquisitorial examinations were not to be resumed.

Of course, Mr. Osborne himself was in almost unbroken intercourse with Scotland Yard, and policemen in plain clothes pervaded the house "from morn to dewy eve." But no one was allowed to penetrate to the room where Queenie lay, nor was she suffered to see or speak with any person whose discretion was not entirely to be relied on. Mrs. Osborne, too, was very much indisposed; her nerves had sustained a severe shock, and the doctor, after placing Annie Derrington on guard in her apartment, strictly forbade all exciting causes, and ordered her to be kept as quiet as possible, and free from anxiety. Queenie would soon be well again; she needed only time and rest to restore her to her normal state of health. With her almost unrivalled constitution, nothing of any moment was to be apprehended. With her mother, whose strength was obviously failing, and whose lungs were delicate, it was far otherwise.

Tuesday passed away without any event of importance taking place; but the "clue" of which the police had spoken had not led up to any fresh discovery; the false Count and his female companion were still at large, and it was whispered that they had escaped to the Continent. Florence L'Estrange had been officially interviewed—but, of course, neither Queenie nor her mother knew anything about it. Mrs. L'Estrange was extremely indignant that her daughter's name should have transpired in connection with so disreputable an affair, though she had been civil enough to the supposed foreign nobleman when they met in society, and had cordially invited him to the house where his real intimacy with poor Queenie had commenced. And Florence was forbidden to pay her friend any visits till such time as the *esclandre* should be well hushed up, or cleared up, or altogether forgotten.

But Tuesday brought both Mrs. Fairfax and Mrs. Derrington to the too notorious mansion on Clapham Common. Aunt Rachel devoted herself to attendance on her sister-in-law. Mrs. Derrington shared the watch of her youngest daughter, whom, for a few days, Queenie would scarcely suffer out of her sight. Happily, however, for her nurses, the young lady slept a good deal, and Dolly and her step-mother were able to sit together in the adjoining room and converse in an undertone, while they were yet within call of the patient.

"I am so very, very thankful," said Dolly, as she and her mother were talking over the terrible experiences of Sunday evening, "so intensely thankful that Kitty had nothing to do with recommending that infamous Susanna South. I am glad, more than glad, that there never was any question about Miss Bella Fowkes; she was a person, I should say, who would never succeed in obtaining any respectable situation—her appearance and manner were so decidedly against her. Do you know what has become of her?"

"No, my dear; Kitty did say she meant to engage her on her own account; but I do not think she has done so. At any rate, I have heard nothing about the young woman."

"Has Kitty heard of the robbery?"

"She heard something about it as early as yesterday morning—for the report has spread like wildfire. She came last night to find out what I knew of the affair; she seemed more amused than horrified at the news I had received; and she thanked her stars that she had had no hand in recommending the accomplished waiting-maid. Then she remarked that it would do Miss Osborne no harm to have to make the discovery, despite her wishes, that 'all is not gold that glitters.' And then she wanted a description of the famous sapphires, for she supposed that I had seen them on the night of the ball—as, indeed, I had. And she particularly wished to know all about the false Count Stanger, and what you and I thought about him, and whether the burglar or the nobleman predominated in his general appearance. She said a good many spiteful things, and I was not at all sorry when she went away. I cannot think why she has taken to visit me so frequently; for several

years she never darkened my doors, as you know ; and she professed to have forgotten all about her own family."

"Do the Chapmans still live at Forest Hill? Kitty was speaking about moving to another house."

"I believe they are still at 'Virginia House,' as they have christened their abode ; but I am not at all sure—Kitty's descriptions of her plans and experiences differ so continuously. Your father, Dolly, has got a very uncomfortable feeling about his eldest daughter ; he considers that her husband—who, by the way, seems to be on the way to wealth—does not make his money at all reputably. Both Fred Chapman and Mr. Hancox have become quite famous on the Turf ; they boast of their betting and gambling, and people do say they are accused of cheating at cards. A great deal goes on that we cannot prevent, and that we would rather know nothing about. Don't let us talk of Kitty, or Nelly, or their husbands, child ! A very little conversation about any of them gives me a fit of indigestion—and I get one of my excruciating headaches. Thank God, I have you and Annie, whom I can talk about, and talk to, and be none the worse."

The next day the late Mrs. Marmaduke Merridew was buried. Of course, Mr. Osborne, as in duty bound, attended the funeral of his wife's kinswoman, and he was at West Hill till quite late in the evening. When he returned, Queenie was not unnaturally desirous to know if things were "likely to be settled?"

"Yes," said her father, glad even of her revived interest in her own affairs ; "all is in course of being satisfactorily arranged ; and what do you think? Dr. Bernardo and Miss Stalker are going to be married, almost immediately ; in fact, as soon as decency permits."

"Married? Those old horrors? How perfectly ridiculous!"

"They have shared a heavy life-burden between them ; they have faithfully accomplished the task committed to them, and I see no reason why they should not reap the reward of their labours and their long endurance together. I was pleased to hear that they had concluded to join their fortunes. And Miss Stalker is not so venerable, after all ; she has not celebrated her jubilee *yet*."

"Not fifty? Why, she is exactly like a mummy; she has the complexion of one. Fancy a bride of fifty! Will she wear Brussels lace and white satin, I wonder? And how old is Dr. Bernardo?"

"I did not inquire; but I should say he is not far off sixty."

"It is too ridiculous—such ancient parties going in for holy matrimony. There ought to be a law against the marriage of people after a certain age. A woman ought to take rank as an old maid at forty; a man, perhaps, might be allowed to wed ten years later. But, perhaps, it is not so much amiss in this particular case; they must know all about each other, and it is not so bad a plan to unite their incomes."

"It is not at all amiss, and I think—and so Mr. Sarginson, the lawyer, thinks—they have well deserved every penny that they will possess. They will inherit between them quite ten thousand pounds, and they have both savings to no inconsiderable amount. They are unambitious people and may live in every comfort."

"Ten thousand pounds is a good deal though," observed Queenie, thoughtfully; "and when all debts and legacies are paid, how much, do you suppose, will come to *me*?"

Mr. Osborne thought a little before he replied. "Well, dear, there will be more than we anticipate; but I do not yet know to how much you will succeed. There are leases of very valuable property on the eve of falling in; and there are bonds and stock of which we know nothing; Mrs. Merridew managed a good deal for herself and did not take Mr. Sarginson into her full confidence; indeed, as her trusted man-of-business, she left him in comparative ignorance; but for Miss Stalker, who has not been treated with reserve, we should find no little difficulty in putting things in order; she is making herself extremely useful, and you, my Queenie, will be under considerable obligations to her, as well as to Dr. Bernardo. The estate would have been put to much extra expense if Miss Stalker had been unable or unwilling to furnish certain information."

"I dare say both she and her intended have taken excel-

lent care to feather their own nests ! They had every opportunity."

"That is not a nice remark, Queenie, and I am sorry you should have made it. You owe something to Miss Stalker, she has studied your interests most certainly. Special bequests which are left to her—apart from money, old furniture, books, curiosities, and the like—are no more than her due ; I sincerely trust you will grudge her nothing, but act towards her and the doctor with all possible generosity ; wherever there may be the slightest doubt you must give her the full benefit. If there is anything she would particularly like to have, that is not actually specified in the will, I have assured her that it shall be her own."

"That was not wise, father ; that unnecessary promise may cost us a good deal. Miss Stalker may insist on the very widest margin."

"Or, she may *not* ! She gives me the idea of a straightforward, right-minded woman, who would not on any account take an advantage. I rejoice in her escape from servitude—if, indeed, it might not be called *slavery* ; and I wish her every happiness."

"You said, father, you thought I should inherit under Aunt Jemima's will about fifteen thousand pounds, and I hope it will not be less ?"

"It will not be less ; it will, in all probability, be a good deal more. I should not be surprised, now that we have unearthed all these securities and deeds, if your inheritance be nearly double that amount. It will be close upon *thirty* thousand pounds, I should say. Aunt Jemima was a shrewd woman of business, and knew what she was about. Up to the last few months she was fully capable of managing her own affairs."

"*Thirty thousand pounds !*" responded Queenie, in an awed voice. "I never thought to be so rich a woman. I may buy the finest pearls in London ; but I shall never feel the same about any other sapphires ; I shall never be able to replace *them*. Is there any news of the jewels ?"

"None. I begin to be afraid, Queenie, we have seen the last of them. I, too, regret the sapphires more than the pearls, which *only* represent money, though a great deal

more money than I care to lose. Meanwhile, my dear, we will try to think as little about our deprivation as may be."

"I shall always think about it ; it has been a cruel experience. I feel now as if I should never look up again—never forget the past, notwithstanding the good fortune which has lately come to me. Father, I know the world will not sympathise with me ; it will say all kinds of ill-natured things behind my back, and perhaps before my face. I was very, very silly to be so credulous ; henceforth I shall be distrustful enough—I shall want chapter and verse for every statement. I shall take my stand upon the *Almanach de Gotha*."

"I do not think we need concern ourselves about the *Almanach de Gotha*, or anything of the kind. We will be content to contract intimacies with those only for whom our own personal friends can be answerable. I fancy you will not be imposed upon a second time, my dear little Queenie."

"Once in a life-time is enough. '*Experientia docet*,' as Philip is fond of saying."

"Exactly. You may roughly translate the old proverb into 'Experience makes fools wise.'"

"To think that I—Regina Osborne—should live to acknowledge myself a fool ! and, what is more, to know that society at large endorses the uncomplimentary imputation ! Father, I must go away."

"Had you not better stop at home and live the silly scandal down ? It will be wiser in the end, I am well assured."

"No ; I will go away—quite away. I have been thinking it over ever since Monday evening. And I will not go to Tenby ; so it is useless to propose it."

For as Mr. Grahame had recommended change of air as soon as Miss Osborne should feel equal to the journey, it had been taken for granted that she and Dolly, accompanied by Miss Middlemore, would spend a few weeks at the pretty little house at Tenby, which Mr. Osborne had purchased several years before for the special benefit of children and grandchildren.

"Mignonette Villa can be ready for your reception at a

few hours' notice, and the air of Tenby always suited you. I was thinking, too, Rose might as well take a little holiday with you. John says she has never been quite strong since the twins were born. And Rose is such a happy, sunshiny little woman."

"If I go from home—and I must and will leave Clapham very speedily—I would rather leave all my relations behind me. Once for all, father, I decline Mignonette Villa; depend upon it, my miserable story has been spread abroad at Tenby already. We know too many people there, and not very nice people, either. I should not wonder if I were accosted as 'Countess Stanger'; and insult added to injury is just what I could not bear. No; I want to go to a place where nobody knows anything about me. I have been thinking I will go to school, and put the finish to my education, if you and mother consent."

"Go to school! A plan against which you have always set your face! And I thought you quite considered your education *finished* and yourself 'out,' as your friends say.

"I was 'out,' certainly, only the other day; but so much has since happened to annoy me that I think it will be well to go in a little—just for awhile. You see, I am not more than seventeen, and no one will be much surprised at my returning for a year or so to my studies. If I were nineteen it would be another thing."

"We did propose your going to Miss Latimer's, with your friend, Marion Slocombe; but you would not hear of it. Both mother and myself thought you might spend another year at your lessons with much advantage. Seventeen is full early to leave school, nowadays."

"I was not thinking of Miss Latimer's, nor of any boarding-school or ladies college in *this* country. I wish to go abroad! It is the only way of getting to speak French properly and fluently. A year in a Paris school is what I want; it would be an entire change, besides finishing me entirely."

Had it not been that Queenie had in some sort made herself talked about in connection with the burglar Count, Mr. Osborne would have protested furiously against the

removal of his idol to such a distance ; and he had, moreover, a little prejudice against France and French society. But as things had taken so untoward a turn just at the moment of Queenie's appearance in her circle, it crossed his mind that perhaps, after all, the scheme was not quite undesirable."

"We will see about it," said Jonathan, a little gloomily. "I don't say it shall not be ; but mother and I must talk it over quietly between ourselves."

"Mother and you must feel that I am proposing a most sensible arrangement. But, of course, you understand that I have no idea of going as a mere *school girl*, to be under common school discipline, and I must have Dolly with me. I should be miserable, alone in a foreign land."

"Have you said anything to Dolly ?"

"Nothing exactly conclusive, for I wished first to lay the project before you. But I have hinted that a short residence in Paris would be very much to our mutual advantage, and Dolly agrees with me that it would. She is always thinking of the first-class ladies' school she and Annie are to keep some day in the country."

And then the conversation ended for that time ; but in spite of her objections, Queenie was fain for once to relinquish her will, and pass a month at Mignonette Villa. She and Dolly and Miss Middlemore spent several very quiet weeks at Tenby, but all the while preparations were being silently made for the migration to Paris.

There arose another difficulty, too, of which Queenie had had no expectation. After some debate, Mr. and Mrs. Osborne had decided that their daughter's desire should be gratified. She should have a year, perhaps longer, in Paris. A thoroughly excellent school should be selected, and Dolly should share all her advantages. Of course, expense would in no way be considered ; there would be no question as to the matter of terms. Then arose a little perplexity. Miss Middlemore, who had finished her own education at a large school at St. Germain, was not by any means sure that there was any such system as that which regulates *parlour boarders* in France ; and Mrs. Herbert Osborne, whose experiences of the country were more

recent, on being consulted, confirmed the good governess's doubts.

"No!" she declared unhesitatingly; "the institution, as known in our country, does not exist across the water. There are no 'parlour-boarders,' acknowledged as such, among French girls, all the pupils being treated as equals, irrespective of age or position. Queenie and Dolly would have to be under the same restraint as much younger girls; they would have to obey rules like the rest of their companions." And both Alice Osborne and Miss Middlemore were agreed that there would be few, if any, exceptions granted in favour of the English young ladies.

"And," said Mrs. Herbert, very gravely, "French schools are not at all like ours, Queenie; girls have far less freedom than with us. There are more rules and stricter regulations, and I never knew any young lady, either English or French, who was permitted extraordinary privileges. The French girls, indeed, dare scarcely believe that their souls are their own; and the very foundation of school discipline seems to be based on the conviction that the pupils, unless closely watched, and vigilantly guarded night and day, are sure to get into mischief, and, sooner or later, compromise themselves and the establishment to which they belong. I assure you that my sister and I had infinitely more freedom at Kensington than at Neuilly!"

Queenie was seriously troubled at this revelation. She did not mind hard study, she would not object to a few simple rules, which she supposed must be inevitable in any *pension*, but to become a mere school girl, to rise and retire to rest at set time, to conform to petty laws, to do as she was bid, just like a little child, were conditions she could not entertain. At one moment, the whole plan seemed to be on the point of falling through—somewhat to Dolly's disappointment, for she had counted not a little on hearing pure French spoken around her, and being herself compelled to speak it from morning till night, and from week's end to week's end, perpetually. Little would she care for being under unwonted restraint; she would not chafe at being under control or at living by stringent rule; at relinquishing, for a period, the sweets of home liberty,

if only she might be sure of coming back to England a Frenchwoman in tongue, though not in spirit.

But Miss Middlemore was, after all, fated to come to the rescue. She had a distant cousin, lately settled at Passy, who, not being overburdened with this world's wealth, was glad to do what she could to supplement her own too slender resources. She had received boarders into her house, though not exactly of the order she would have preferred; but she had one young lady under her care, for educational purposes, and she wished much to receive a few private pupils into her family, on special terms. It was exactly what Queenie and Dolly wanted; they would be entitled to peculiar privileges—very much as *parlour boarders* were in England; and they would enjoy every advantage where lessons were concerned.

Madame Pierrot was the widow of a Frenchman, and had spent more than half her life in Paris; she was a Protestant—as had been her late husband. Miss Middlemore could answer for her efficiency as a teacher, and also satisfy them that Madame's household was conducted on the most liberal principles; Miss Middlemore herself would also accompany her former pupils, and spend a few months with them in her kinswoman's family, as she had lately conceived the idea of investing her savings in a first-class ladies' school, if she could find a suitable partner; and her French, as she confessed, sadly wanted "rubbing up," and had never, perhaps, been quite as good as might be expected from the principal of a superior establishment, such as she hoped to call her own at no very distant period.

It was the middle of March before the several parties concerned came to a final understanding; but before the month was quite at an end it was settled that Queenie and Dolly, under the care of Miss Middlemore, should take up their residence with Madame Pierrot as soon as the Easter recess terminated.

In the meantime nothing at all had been heard of the lost jewels; the police had failed in all the grand discoveries they were upon the brink of making. "Count Stanger" and Miss or Madam "Susanna South" had disappeared

as entirely as if they had departed this life, or emigrated to the North Pole. Queenie, though she deeply deplored her matchless "star sapphires," had regained her spirits, and was revelling in her anticipations of the gay capital. For she had stipulated for a certain amount of freedom, both for herself and for Dolly; when certain hours of study had been observed they were to be at liberty to spend their time pretty much as they pleased, and go where they liked; always being accompanied by Madame Pierrot, or by their ex-governess, Miss Middlemore. With the latter they were to attend the services of the Congregational church, as it then existed, in the Rue Royale. Madame herself was an Episcopalian—when she went anywhere. One of the assistant governesses was a Roman Catholic—rather to Mr. Osborne's chagrin; but then, as he assured himself, the girls were all right; and Miss Middlemore was a sound Dissenter; and one could scarcely expect to find an unmitigatedly Protestant household in the capital city of France.

It was also arranged that Annie Derrington should remain at "The Acacias" during her sister's absence; for Mrs. Osborne would need a younger companion than poor old Nurse, who became more infirm than ever during the severe months of that icy winter, and the trying spring that followed. But so long as Queenie remained in her own country, she secluded herself from the outside world. She went no more to church after that memorable Sunday evening; she attended no more parties, not even the quiet Dorcas Meeting which was held once a month in the Ladies' Vestry, and to which she was specially invited. Her father produced tickets for a grand concert at Exeter Hall, where, in those days, the best music was always to be heard. But Queenie declined the opportunity, and suffered Dolly and Annie to accompany her father without her. She went once to the Crystal Palace, and was sitting in the Concert Room there, when she observed the glance of an old acquaintance turned upon herself, and from that moment her pleasure in the music was all over. She made haste to escape into quite another part of the vast building.

Oh, poor Queenie was paying bitterly for her brief season of folly ; she was paying the full price, and beyond, as she thought, for all the mistakes she had made through the final weeks of the old year, and the early days of the new one. It was most galling to her proud spirit, to be thus compelled, in spite of herself, to keep aloof from every haunt of gaiety, and from the society of which she had so long anticipated being the flower and ornament. Her heart-wounds were entirely healed, if, indeed, she had ever suffered at all in that respect ; it was her pride that had been so cruelly hurt. She had been humbled to the dust, indeed ; but Dolly often wondered whether, in spite of all the mortification to which she had been subjected, she was really and truly penitent. In future years, when the remembrances of her folly and its consequences should have faded quite away, might she not be again infatuated ? enthralled more completely and more fatally than in the present instance ? For pride, and vanity, and self-will are sins that ripen bitter fruit over and over again !



CHAPTER XXV.

THE DERRINGTON SISTERS.

BY the middle of April all was ready for the journey which Queenie and Dolly were to undertake. The winter had been dark and chill—more than usually severe, and the early months of the year had given but the very smallest promise of advancing spring. The days had lengthened, and the cold had strengthened, as poor Nurse complained ; the Common seemed never quite free from the dazzling snow ; and the skaters on the large pools boasted that they had not had such a glorious season in all their lives before.

But if winter had lingered unduly, and kept spring waiting shivering at her accustomed portals, the change came at last with startling rapidity. People went to bed one night shaking their heads over the pertinacious frosts that were recurring again and again, just as they had begun to dream of a vernal season ; and woke next morning to find the sun shining, the winds—such as had not gone off to Labrador and Spitzbergen—blowing softly from the south, the birds singing for very rapture, and the flowers that had been due a month or two earlier, bursting into simultaneous bloom, as though anxious to atone for the long, weary delay, and anticipate early summer.

By the time the girls had finished their preparations, and were busy with their packing, the month of blossoms was expanding into full beauty, the well-trodden greensward of the long, barren Common was enamelled with wee crimson-tipped daisies, the leafing lime trees glistened like pale emeralds in the sunshine, and the garden-beds were gay with hyacinths and early tulips, and sweet with clustering, modest violets. The girls could not but regret the spring loveliness they were leaving behind them, for never had home seemed so lovely to either Queenie or Dolly, now that they were on the eve of departure.

Dolly, especially, felt depressed as she walked through the familiar rooms and corridors of the home she loved so well, and, gladly as she had seized the opportunity of a sojourn in Paris, and much as she appreciated the advantages that were about to fall to her lot, she could scarcely keep the tears out of her eyes as she looked all around her, and knew that within four-and-twenty hours she would be on her way to France, and her own dear country be but a memory to her through all the weeks and months of the forthcoming year. For it had been settled, and with Dolly's full approbation, that she and Queenie should remain Madame Pierrot's boarders, nor think of returning to their own land till full twelve months had passed away.

Mrs. Herbert Osborne had assured her that she could not possibly expect to master the language in less time than a year, and to come back with her object half-accomplished was by no means to be thought of. She would

have to work hard if she was to finish all she intended to do within the year. As for Queenie, the prospect before her had suddenly acquired so much brilliance, so much desirability, that she only hoped they might be allowed to extend their residence abroad for an extended term. She was quite certain she would never be tired of life in Paris—gay, beautiful Paris! She was weary of the humdrum life she was leading at home; she wanted to be “a long way off Clapham,” and her brother Philip asked her one day, satirically, whether, after all, Paris was far enough? had she not better spend her leave of absence in St. Petersburg, or New York, while she was about it?

“And you will take all care of dear Mother-Osborne?” said Dolly, as she and Annie took their last walk across the Common, on the evening before one of them was to bid farewell to England. “Mind, Annie, but for one reason—yes, perhaps for *two* reasons, nothing would induce me to go away from home for so long a time. You will stay and take my place, while I study for you, as well as for myself. I shall be quite an authority when I come back, and we shall be one step further on the road to all you and I have planned together. Oh, I am most thankful for this opportunity. God helping me, I will profit by it to the utmost. And I feel that at the same time I shall be in some small measure repaying a little of the kindness that has been showered upon me ever since I came to be the Osbornes’ adopted child. I will do my very best to take care of dear Queenie.”

“That I know you will, Dolly; but I tell you plainly that if Miss Middlemore were not to be with you for some months, at least, I would move heaven and earth to prevent you setting off to-morrow. Whoever devotes herself, or himself, to Regina Osborne, will have to pay a high price for the privilege. She has had a lesson now, and a sharp lesson, too; but I doubt if it will be an abiding one. Queenie will go her own way, and she will not care what sacrifices she exacts from those who are supposed to regard her with affection. Dolly, Queenie lives for herself—and for herself alone. I feel assured that she will never hesitate to offer up any victim at the shrine of her own supreme potentiality.”

"Nay, now, Annie, I think you do Queenie some injustice; she is wilful, I know; she is fortune's spoiled child, and she has as little idea of relinquishing her own way as her parents have of withholding whatever she demands. But she is generous and noble; indeed she is! Ah, you smile, but you do not know her as I do; and somehow you two have not exactly taken to each other. But I have been brought up with her, and understand her disposition, and—*I love her!*"

"I know you do, dear, and you ought to love her, if only for her parents' sake. I quite comprehend your determination to do your duty—and more than your duty—by their idolized child; but I implore you, Dolly, hold your own, as people say, and make your protest whenever Queenie tries to ride roughshod over you."

"Oh, Queenie will never be a tyrant—at least, I think not."

"I don't know! There are tyrants *and* tyrants; and there is many an iron gauntlet beneath a velvet glove. It seems to me that Miss Osborne sways all about her, in one way or another, and every year sees her more exacting and more imperious. Ah, but I am thankful Miss Middlemore shares with you all actual responsibilities."

"In a certain sense I have no responsibility at all, for no one will expect Queenie to defer to me on any point. Though we are exactly the same age, I have always had to enact the *rôle* of younger sister; she has always led, and I have had, as far as I could, to follow; and, of course, as she grows older, you may be sure that she will not abate an inch of her prerogative. And this inheritance, to which she has so suddenly succeeded, will not tend to lessen her importance, in her own eyes."

"Nor in the eyes of the world. Society combines to spoil the favourites of fortune; the children of prosperity are petted till they scarcely know their right hand from their left. And Queenie will be rich, very rich, Mrs. Osborne has told me. She knows that thirty thousand pounds is accumulating for her; but her mother is sure it will be a much larger sum by the time she is five-and-twenty. Whatever will she do with all her wealth? Make ducks and drakes of it?"

"She may ; I cannot tell. It is utterly impossible to foresee, even remotely, the career of a rich, beautiful, wilful heiress. Mr. Osborne would never have given in to this caprice of hers now, I am well persuaded, were he not convinced that she will be, for awhile, under supervision. She has put on the harness of her own free will ; she has consented—indeed, she has proposed—to be a school-girl again, so that some degree of retirement is inevitable. She will be in far less danger from the flattery and false worship of unscrupulous adventurers, if it is really understood that she is under certain restrictions, and may not do exactly as she chooses. And from what Alice tells me, and from what I gather from Miss Middlemore, we shall, both of us, be under far more restraint than would be the case in our own country."

"It will be good for Miss Osborne ; not quite so good for yourself, Dolly—for though your birthdays are identical, you are, in reality, some years older than she is. You are a woman, and somewhat of a philosopher ; she is a child in fickleness, in caprice, in actual knowledge of the world. Neither you nor I, for one moment, believed in that German or Hungarian impostor. I did not, even to the very last, recognise him for an accomplished thief—a *burglar* ; but I had not a doubt that he was pursuing poor Queenie for some purpose of his own, and was perfectly regardless of *her* interest, her happiness, or her honour. Let us all be thankful that her jewels, and her complacency have paid the price that was demanded."

"We are thankful—she is thankful herself. She has had a blow—a dreadful blow. She has suffered cruelly, for her vanity has been practised upon, and that before all the world ; her pride has been wounded, and it will be many a day before she will recover from the shock she has received. She is very humble now—my poor deceived Queenie."

"Well, I won't go on preaching, dear ; only please to remember that I am in very deed your *own* sister, and you owe something to me as well as to her. Do not efface yourself—that is, your inner self—at Queenie's bidding. If her wilfulness return—and who knows what may be her next whim?—do not, I pray you, consent, for her sake, to keep

any sort of secret, for any sort of reason. Hide nothing, withhold nothing, from Miss Middlemore, nor from Mr. and Mrs. Osborne. You will serve Queenie best by refusing absolutely to keep any secret."

"I believe I shall. But at present I hope, and am pretty certain, she will have no secrets to confide. And, God knows, I do want to serve her—and will serve her, at any cost. It is not good for her to be alone in Paris with only Miss Middlemore; for our dear old governess, though a wise woman in her own especial way, is yet very easily beguiled, and she is not endowed by nature with more than ordinary perception. Besides, when Queenie is quite herself again, she will rule Miss Middlemore, as she did ten years ago—as she has done ever since."

"You spoke of two reasons for leaving England just now; what was the second reason?"

"My second reason I would rather say nothing about, Annie. You would scarcely understand it, if I did."

"Are you sure of that? What should you say if I told you that I knew it?"

"I should say you are very far seeing, and entreat you to be silent on the subject—not only to all around us, but to myself. For I think I am doing what my conscience tells me I ought to do. I shall try to put the present away from me entirely from the hour I leave 'The Acacias.' It will be time enough to reconsider my duty when I come back again to Clapham."

"Of course, Queenie knows nothing of the affair?"

"It is not an 'affair'; it is a mere floating idea. Queenie, of course does not guess it. I have no confidences of my own to bestow upon any one. If you think I have private reasons for being glad—that is, in a sense, glad for leaving home—say nothing about them, please, even to Mrs. Derrington."

"I will not, though I am not at all sure that mother may not have something to remark on her own account. Your enigma has been no riddle to any one in this house for a long time past, and Queenie has formed her own opinions, I am tolerably certain. Only the other day she was wondering what Philip would do when *you* were quite away; and

she hoped it would not be a case of 'absence makes the heart grow fonder,' but rather an incentive towards some new attachment."

"Did she really say that?" asked Dolly, somewhat taken off her guard.

"She said that, and a good deal more, which, being uttered in my presence, I feel pretty sure was intended to be conveyed to you. Queenie thinks you are not good enough for Philip—that is, that you are not of sufficient individual importance."

"And I quite agree with her; my relations with the Osbornes ought not to be any closer than they are at present. Annie, don't be offended; but I do think both you and I labour under a disadvantage that is no fault of our own. We cannot help being *who* we are; it is no blame to us, for we could not avoid it: it is rather our *misfortune* to be Derringtons."

"I suppose it is; but still, some of us are—well—respectable."

"And some of us are not, but exactly the contrary. Annie, some dreadful doubts have crossed my mind within the last month; but as they are only doubts, I had better, far better, not communicate them to you. I will only say that I am afraid, very much afraid, that Kitty and her husband will some day go just a little too far, and expose themselves to the utmost rigour of the law."

"Mr. Chapman is certainly a most shady character, and the less we have to say about him the better. We need not—we will not, if we can help it—ever acknowledge him as a relation; but Kitty is of our blood—she is our eldest sister."

"And she is Fred Chapman's wife! And a woman can never be separated from her husband. Annie, I shall never forget that Kitty is our sister, and if I can be true to her, without being false to anybody else, I will do my best to serve her. But if she prove to be Fred's *accomplice*, the disgrace to her kith and kin will be incontestable. For myself, I have resolved *never to marry*, never to give encouragement, directly or indirectly, to any man who may show signs of becoming my lover."

"And I suppose I ought to make the same resolve, for Kitty and Nellie are my sisters as well as yours, and I have been far more intimately connected with my own family than you have. Even if open disgrace do not befall us we shall always be afraid of pronouncing certain names in association with ours. But I am less likely to be tempted than you are, Dolly. I am not half as handsome, and I am not so accomplished or so clever, and my station in life is lower. I take rank with my father, who is Mr. Osborne's hired servant; and with my dear stepmother, who is a woman to be honoured and esteemed of all men; but who does not pretend to be *a lady*!"

"Yet a lady she is at heart. If Mrs. Derrington had graduated in a kitchen, or behind a counter, she would be one of God Almighty's *ladies*."

"She will never lay claim to the title; neither will I, Dolly. A 'lady' in the present day is only a person who can afford, or, at least, *manage* to dress in a certain style, and speak decent English. I am content to be a woman, since I am afraid I can never aspire to be a *gentlewoman*."

"True gentlewomen are by no means to be met with commonly, or promiscuously. I wonder if we shall ever take rank as 'highly respectable' and well-accredited schoolmistresses. I shall be quite content if *some day*, Annie, you and I may be able to carry out the scheme of independence that we planned so many years ago."

"I don't see, dear, why you should ever contemplate throwing in your lot with mine. I have been bred to earn my living. I have been used from childhood to toil and self-denial, and to a good deal of painful economy. You have been reared in luxury and refinement; and I feel very well assured that, married or single, you will be amply provided for."

"As far as appears I am not likely ever to know real penury; but we can never tell, in this mutable world, what may betide; and I should like to feel myself independent, at all events. I do not think I should like an idle life in any case; if my own family were richer, and altogether other than they are, I might feel differently. So I mean to make the very best of my advantages, and I shall be in

duty bound not only to watch over Queenie, and minister to her happiness, but to study five times as hard as she will, or need to study. And now we are almost at home, and I have a little packing to finish yet. I end as I began, Annie—take every care of my dear Mother-Osborne, for Queenie's sake, as well as for my sake; for everybody's sake guard her from all evil, she is a precious trust; for women so sweet, and pure, and lovely-souled are rare indeed. When she is gone we shall not see her like again."

"Her state of health makes you anxious."

"To a certain extent it does; she is very frail. But I think her constitution is sound, and with care she may live yet many years; all the longer, perhaps, that she will be secure from many shocks in consequence of our absence abroad. Wherever Queenie is she will carry with her a certain atmosphere, an exciting influence that is the reverse of good for an invalid. The worry of the ball, though she had so little to do with it herself; the apparition of poor Aunt Jemima, the news of her death, the uncomfortable gossip about Count Stanger, the misgivings as to Susanna South, and then the shock and terror of the burglary, or robbery, itself, have combined to unsettle dear mother's nerves, and reduce her to a deplorable state of weakness."

"But she is decidedly better now? Mr. Grahame pronounced her very much improved when he paid his visit this morning."

"She is wonderfully better; the long winter has been sadly against her. The parting to-morrow will be a trial to her strength; but when that is over she will rally again, I am sure. And, if you can help it, Annie, do not let the events of last winter dwell upon her mind. Say as little as may be on the subject of that awful night; and mind you keep plenty of interesting books on hand. Luckily you are as fond of reading aloud as she is of listening, and then your chest is sound."

"Sound as a bell, thank God! I might take the post of reader to a blind person, if all other trades failed. My lungs are far stronger than yours."

"Far stronger! Mine have been always a little weak, ever since I was so ill in Dorchester Street, and at the

tender mercies of Kitty and Nellie. I owe my life to Mrs. Osborne, for I should have died if I had been left much longer to my fate ; or if I had lived a few years longer, it would have been as a chronic invalid. Ah ! what do I not owe to my dear father and Mother-Osborne !”

“And all springs from your having been born on Christmas morning, at the same time as Queenie.”

“Yes ; all my mercies spring from Him who ‘ordered’ my life from its very beginning. It was *His* good will that I came into the world, on that cold Christmas morning, so many years ago ; it was God who disposed so many kindly hearts in my favour. May His blessing go with me to the end.”

“Amen ! And may *He* bring you safely back again to your own faithful sister ; for we have always been real sisters, Dolly—you and I ; and I shall miss you terribly, all the while you are away.”

“We shall miss each other, dear ; but the separation will not be for so very long, and it will be over-ruled for our mutual good, I feel sure. Besides, you will have Mother-Osborne all to yourself ; you don’t know how sweet and good and dear she is ; you cannot till you are always with her, and see down into her very soul. Then you will have, or may have, if you will, plenty of Mother-Derrington’s society. And, oh, Annie, keep Aunt Rachel with you as much as possible. She is not what some people would call quite ‘ladylike,’ sometimes ; but she is a downright good woman—true and noble-minded—yes ! ‘true as gold !’ A genuine Christian, abounding in common-sense, and doing her duty day by day, according to her lights. Aunt Rachel is a woman in a thousand ; there is not an atom of *sham* in her whole composition ; she is sound to the core.”

“I know that she is inalienably your friend, and I like her none the less for that.”

“She was always my friend. From the hour I was established in the old night-nursery—a poor puling frightened little child—to the present day, Aunt Rachel has been my friend, my kind and judicious adviser. Always give heed to what she has to say, Annie ; for her counsel is well worth having.”

And while the sisters were taking their farewell ramble on the now leafy common, Queenie was putting the finishing stroke to her long task of packing. Since the summary departure of Miss Susanna South, she had, for very shame, been silent as to her probable successor. Nothing had been said in the household about the new lady's maid that would be required for Miss Osborne ; and as, for the nonce, Miss Osborne had abjured gaieties, and retired generally into private life, there was obviously less need for any such functionary.

The parlour-maid had been Queenie's assistant all day, helping her to fold her dresses and lay them in the travelling trunks which had been newly provided for the occasion ; but as the afternoon waned, she was dismissed to her own quarters with an injunction to hold herself in readiness to resume her duties whenever summoned by her young mistress's bell. And Queenie, tired out by her unwonted labours, flung herself upon her bed, and refreshed herself with a good long *siesta*. She might have slept on till dark, as she said herself ; had she not been roused by the sound of some one lifting the tray of her open trunk. She started up immediately, for she had been dreaming of Susanna South, and that she had come back to possess herself of all the beautiful jet trinkets that she had been arranging in cotton-wool not an hour before. It was only Mrs. Fairfax, who had come to see what else Queenie might possibly require ; for her services had been in constant requisition ever since her arrival at "The Acacias," two days before.

"Oh ! is it you, Auntie ? I was quite frightened, for I had been dreaming uncomfortably. What is it ?"

"Nothing, my dear ; I have brought back the black grenadine bodice that was forgotten when we put in that last lot of lace tuckers ; I am sorry I awoke you."

"Oh, it does not matter ; I only meant to take forty winks, and I must have been sound asleep for a good hour. My nerves are not quite so strong as they used to be, once upon a time ; do you know, Aunt Rachel, I thought you were a thief, going to carry off my trinket-box, that I left there, on the table ? Have you seen my jet chain, and necklet, and the earrings, and brooch, and bracelets to match ?"

"No, Queenie; I had no idea you were running up a fresh score at your jeweller's; I fancied a school-girl did not want many ornaments."

"Pray don't brand me as a *school-girl*, Aunt Rachel; I am not exactly going back to my lessons, and you may be certain I am not going to relinquish *all* the pleasures of the toilet. Of course, while I am in mourning I must wear good jet ornaments. Would you not like to see them before I shut them up?"

Mrs. Fairfax replied by opening the dainty little fancy boxes, and solemnly examining them by the aid of her eye-glass. "Yes, Queenie," she said, when she had replaced each trinket in its woolly nest; "they are in very good taste, and, I should say, tolerably expensive."

"Yes," returned Queenie, complacently; "they cost no end of money! I had no idea jet was so very expensive; I thought a few shillings, or, at the outside, a sovereign, would set me up in mourning jewellery. But, of course, I could not do without it; and I always like to purchase the best that is to be had for cash, whatever it may be. Is not that necklet—it is almost a collarette—*lovely*?"

"Yes; it is very lovely; but, I should say, very fragile. I had a jet-chain once, and it cost so much to keep it in repair that I gave up wearing it. I wonder if Dolly would care to have it! She will want something of the kind, as she is wearing mourning, as well as yourself."

"I don't think Dolly would care for it, Auntie; she never likes anything that is liable to be broken; and she has a very nice watch-chain that will not break; it is made of vulcanite. And mother gave her a jet brooch. Of course, Dolly went into mourning with the rest of us, as one of the family; and she had to put away her beautiful carved coral set—her birthday gift, you know. Ah, she had the luck to keep *her* pretty things!"

"I am very glad she had, Queenie; I think she deserved to keep them."

"And you think I deserved to lose mine?"

"What do you think yourself, Queenie?"

"I suppose I was very foolish, Aunt Rachel; but I have suffered for my folly, and it is unkind of you to remind me

of it—and just when we were about to part for, no one can say how long a time ! ”

“ My dear Queenie, I do not mean to be unkind : but I cannot help wishing you were more truly repentant, and lamented your ‘folly’ more, and your loss less ; you brought upon yourself all that happened several months ago ! And Queenie, my dear, unless you pursue a very different course of conduct, I am afraid you will bring down upon yourself, as well as upon those dearest to you, far heavier calamities than you have yet sustained.”

“ You need not fear for me, Auntie ; if I have lost my jewels I have gained a good deal of experience ; the lesson has been sharp enough even for such discipline as *you* would deal out. I shall never listen to flattery more ; I shall be on my guard against all adventurers of any class. Do not fear for me, Aunt Rachel.”

“ But I do fear for you, child, for you are self-confident ; and though your experience has been bitter, the lessons that have been forced upon you have not taught you all, or nearly all, that you were meant to learn from them. Queenie, you have many faults—indeed I do not say it in any unkindness—and I am afraid you are not open to conviction. You do not, *will* not, perceive the root of all your errors ; and till you do perceive it, till you own it to yourself, there is little chance of any true or lasting reformation.”

“ And what *is* at the root of ‘all my errors,’ as you are pleased to call my little mistakes ? ” responded Queenie, sulkily. She always resented being told the truth when it was in the least uncomplimentary.

“ *Vanity* is at the bottom of all, Queenie ; and vanity is begotten of selfishness, which, my dear, is the sin of sins, and wrecks more souls than many an open vice.”

“ And you would say I have sinned this ‘*sin of sins*’ ! Auntie, you are horribly unjust. I am sure I never do wrong wilfully—that is to say, deliberately—and you reproach me as if I were the guiltiest of the guilty ! Are not all pretty young girls vain ? I cannot help knowing I am very pretty ; my glass tells me that, if flatterers do not.”

“ Child, you are more than pretty, more than very pretty. You are lovelier than almost anybody in the world, I think,

and it is well that you should know that such is the indisputable fact. But oh, Queenie! God has given you your wonderful beauty for His glory; and some day, when you are called to answer for all your gifts, you will have to render account for the fair, fair face that has been yours; for beauty is a *talent*, and if you misuse it, woe is yours!"

"I don't understand. How can I misuse my beauty?"

"By priding yourself on it unduly; by neglecting soul-beauty; by attaching paramount importance to the lovely casket that enshrines your real self, your immortal spirit. Child, the long and the short of it is that you live to *yourself* and for your own ends, and on that rock of vanity you may, unless God save you from yourself, make shipwreck of your earthly life. And remember, Queenie, you cannot wreck your own life without involving others in the ruin. No. I have one more word to say, and then I have done. Remember that all your life you have lived within sound of the Gospel; you know the truth—in theory, at least—and you are the child of praying parents. Your family is a godly family, the friend of your youth is a Christian friend. And, Queenie, it is written: '*That servant who knew his lord's will, and prepared not himself, neither did according to his will, shall be beaten with many stripes. But he that knew not, and did commit things worthy of stripes, shall be beaten with few stripes. For unto whomsoever much is given, of him shall be much required; and to whom men have committed much, of him they will ask the more.*'"

Queenie wept bitterly. Oh! how could Aunt Rachel be so cruel, so unjust, in her accusations? For, though she had been very silly, and, doubtless, very wrong, she had never "*meant any harm.*" Ah, Queenie! they who mean no harm are often the guiltiest of malefactors; they are blind—too often *wilfully* blind—to their own transgressions and their own deficiencies. They *do* the harm, whether they mean it or no. They are their own worst enemies, and they work woe wherever they roam, and with whomsoever they are associated.

The day came when poor Queenie lay low in the dust, beaten with *many stripes*. And in her anguish her too faithful memory recalled that day when her aunt had

warned her that as to her much had been given, much would be, and much *was*, required. It seemed to her then as if the solemn words were graven with an adamantine pen upon the tablets of her aching heart.

CHAPTER XXVI.

LA MAISON D'OR.

QUEENIE was delighted beyond measure with Paris, though during the journey and for the first few days of her residence at *Maison d'Or* she maintained a dignified taciturnity that was supposed to pass for subdued melancholy, but which might have been, by any careless observer, mistaken for a mild fit of the sulks.

When the actual moment of parting arrived, it was almost more than Dolly could bear with anything approaching to equanimity, only she had been warned—as was also her *compagnon de voyage*—to spare Mrs. Osborne all possible excitement. Queenie's distress was so utterly uncontrollable that Nurse, in sheer dismay, sought out her master in the library, and implored him to interfere before “mistress fainted from exhaustion.”

Mr. Osborne came quickly to the rescue; but neither reprimand nor entreaty seemed to have any effect upon the weeping Regina, who, drowned in tears and choked with sobs, declared that she could not leave her home; that she neither could nor would be exiled from her country and her parents and from every friend she had in the wide world, save only Dolly and Miss Middlemore. Meanwhile, her mother was gradually relapsing into insensibility; and Mrs. Fairfax, losing all patience, told her demonstratively-lamenting niece that she was “inconsideration and selfishness personified.”

"You are so cruel, so heartless, Auntie!" wailed Queenie, as Mrs. Fairfax vainly endeavoured to force her into another room. "You don't know what it is to leave your mother for months, and perhaps for years, and go far away into a foreign land, and be at the mercy of strangers."

By this time Mr. Osborne had appeared on the scene of action. He at once drew his daughter away from the bedside, and gravely addressing her, remarked, "You should have thought of this before, Queenie. Whatever pain this parting may cause you—and I can well believe that you are suffering acutely at the present moment—it is all your own doing. You have only yourself to thank for going 'into exile'; you pronounced sentence of banishment upon yourself—for, to tell the truth, you made your own neighbourhood too hot to hold you! Control yourself, my child, for your mother's sake, and remember—though I do not wish to reproach you with past follies—you owe this enforced parting entirely to your own weakness and imprudence; not to mention the insincerity you have practised. Come downstairs at once, and without any further ado. I hear the carriage being brought round."

"I cannot go!" sobbed Queenie passionately—"indeed, I cannot! If you love me, father, don't ask me to stir a step; I will not go—I *cannot*!"

"Yes, you can, Queenie; and you will, and what is more, you *must*."

Despite her wild grief, Queenie looked up in amazement, and for the moment the rain of tears was stayed. It was so long—so very long—since that little cogent word of one syllable had been applied to herself, that she could scarcely believe her ears. Had her father ever addressed her in that tone before? Had he ever said she "*must*" since the days of her early childhood, when a dose of nauseous medicine had had to be forced upon her? But, in a moment, she recovered herself, and remembered that she was *not* a child—she was a young woman, in her eighteenth year, and heiress, in her right, to the overflowing coffers of Mrs. Marmaduke Merridew.

"Oh, I cannot!" she repeated; "and what is more, I *will not*!" And Miss Osborne set her pearly teeth together,

and clenched her dimpled white hands, as one who was resolved to set the whole world at defiance. Now Jonathan Osborne, though so frequently the bond-slave of his spoiled darling, felt just a little angered, and he replied in a voice that struck Felicia Regina with utter dismay, "If you refuse to obey, Queenie, you must be compelled. I can scarcely carry you myself, I am afraid ; but go you must, and shall, and without any more fuss. I give you the choice to accompany me to the carriage *at once*, or be borne thither in the strong arms of our coachman and gardener, who will, without ceremony, do as I command them."

For one minute Queenie paused, then she quailed, and took the arm her father courteously offered. She literally grasped for breath, but she wept no longer ; and in a few seconds she was in the carriage ; and Dolly—in tears, showering kisses on Annie, who was in tears also—was on the steps waiting to take her place beside her.

"Well, good-bye, my dear children, and God be with you," said Mr. Osborne, when all was securely packed. "I must go back to mother, and see how she fares, for she will need some consolation."

"Then he bestowed a hearty paternal embrace on Dolly, who returned it warmly, though she had to struggle for composure as she gave her parting kiss. Queenie was not so amicably disposed ; her tears were dried—almost miraculously so, it seemed—though she still sobbed almost convulsively ; but she proudly turned away her head, and her father pressed unresponding lips. "Good-bye," she said, as steadily as her breath would let her—"Good-bye, father ! I shall not soon forget your unfeeling conduct, your determination to expose me to ignominy ! No ; under the circumstances, I decline to return your kiss."

"Queenie, my child," exclaimed Mr. Osborne, aghast at his daughter's implacable spirit, "think better of it ! you cannot leave your poor old daddy without one kiss. Come, darling !"

"No, I'd rather not, thank you ; you taunted me with insincere dealing a moment ago, and I am not going to endorse your uncivil comments by kissing you, when—for the hour—affection is dead."

"Queenie?"

"I said 'for the hour'; perhaps it will be for less. By the time we reach 'London-bridge' I may feel more like myself again. Let us say no more this morning."

Without a word, Mr. Osborne returned to the house, and the carriage rolled on its way to London-bridge. The luggage had gone on the first thing in the morning, and Philip was to be at the railway station to see to its being duly registered, and to take the tickets. He was to go with the young ladies as far as Croydon, where they were to be joined by Miss Middlemore, who had started from Victoria.

Queenie seemed rather taken aback when, without a rejoinder, her father, taking her at her word, reascended the steps. She had certainly expected some further remonstrance. No! for all his petting he could not really love her, or he never would have spoken so severely, just on the eve of parting, too. She quite overlooked the fact that she had obstinately refused to obey his commands, behaving very much like a naughty, unreasonable, rebellious child. She felt herself most grievously wronged, and only regretted that it would be quite out of her power to manifest any resentment for a long while to come. She did not speak till they were almost at Kennington.

Then she said, "Dolly, I can see that you are shocked at my refusing father a parting kiss, and I am sorry, too, that any unpleasantness should have occurred on this last morning. But it is no fault of mine; I cannot forgive on the instant, as I suppose you would advise. He did not behave like a father, and I could not behave like a daughter; that is all."

"But, my dearest Queenie, poor father was cut to the heart. I could see it in his face, and there were absolutely tears in his eyes. You must send a kind message back by your brother; or perhaps it would be better to write a little note, expressing your sorrow for your hasty temper, and asking forgiveness."

"I shall ask no forgiveness; it is for him to make the apology. He treated me like a froward child."

It was as much as Dolly could do to repress the answer

that rose to her lips, for she thought Queenie had exactly described herself. It was best, she knew by experience, to say as little as possible, for Queenie would scarcely ever own herself in the wrong ; and the humility that had been the result of shame was fast vanishing away. She only remarked : " Well, dear, I hope you will think better of it presently. Should anything happen to dear father while we are away on the Continent, the remembrance of your parting in anger from him would overwhelm you with remorse. It would be almost more than you could bear ; you would never be able to forgive yourself."

" That will do, Dolly ! " said Queenie, with just a little unsteadiness in her voice, as she choked down an irrepressible sob ; " you know I always object to being lectured. The less you say on the subject the better for both of us. I have been *hurt*—stung to the quick—insulted ! You did not hear all that passed, so you cannot judge between us. Let us say no more about it."

And Dolly knew that that was decisive. Queenie, like many other people who feel that they cannot control their temper, and know that if the discussion be continued they must get quite the worst of the argument, always closed her objurgations with " Let us say no more about it."

So no more was said about it, and Queenie relapsed into solemn taciturnity, that, as I remarked before, could scarcely be distinguished from sulkiness. She had very little to say to Philip, whom she found awaiting her arrival at London-bridge ; and though she condescended to be kissed, and to return the fraternal greeting, it was somehow under protest, as if Philip, too, was sharing in his father's disgrace.

Dolly felt extremely unhappy over this untoward event, and her last glimpse of St. Paul's, and of the transpontine suburbs of London, was dimmed by the tears that would gather in her eyes, as she tenderly bade farewell to the city of her birth. Queenie's eyes were now quite dry—the sluices had exhausted themselves ; besides, as she knew very well, weeping only dimmed her lovely violet eyes and clouded her exquisite complexion, and it was always against

her principles to give way to emotion that was sure to result disadvantageously to her personal appearance. Also, she was beginning to suffer a little from the morning's excitement, and a bad headache was by no means improbable.

At Croydon Miss Middlemore joined the travellers, and Philip took his last farewell of his sister and Dolly. Rather in a hurry, too ; for he had but a few minutes to catch the return train to town, and he was not quite sure which platform he must ascend. Miss Middlemore was in rather low spirits, and was hardly able to acknowledge his greetings. She did not at first notice her ex-pupil's depression ; and Queenie was constitutionally liable to "moods"—a sort of complaint which it was wise to recognise as little as might be. So they were not a very cheerful party, as the tidal train bore them at full speed towards Folkestone, which in those days was reached by a rather different route than is followed now ; and all through the journey Queenie persisted in her sullen silence.

Even the sight of the sea, which she had never crossed before, did not rouse her ; she would not even join in Dolly's admiration of the long line of white cliffs lying like frosted silver on the receding horizon. But, though the morning was fair and bright, the wind was strong ; and when they were about half-way over it freshened to a gale, and then it had to be proved what sort of sailors the young people were.

The moment the steamer began to roll, Miss Middlemore, mindful of past experiences, retreated to the ladies' cabin. Dolly speedily succumbed to her fate, but preferred to remain on deck ; while Queenie, her usual good fortune attending her, was altogether unaffected by the rising and falling of the waves. She kept her seat on the paddle-box, undismayed ; and when the passage was over, and Boulogne reached, observed calmly to the admiring captain, who was complimenting her on her bravery, that she was sure from the first that she never would be sea-sick, and that she was now firmly convinced that *mal-de-mer* was simply the result of nervousness and *a want of will*.

The captain, of course, would not venture to contradict

so beautiful a young lady ; neither could he exactly endorse his lovely passenger's opinion. He contented himself with a low bow, and another glance at the beauty that fairly subdued him ; observing that doubtless very much was to be attributed to the force of nervous imagination, and he only wished the voyage could last for weeks, or months, instead of for two hours only.

Safely landed at Boulogne, Queenie paid a satisfactory visit to the *buffet*, and made an excellent luncheon, while her less fortunate companions were fain to content themselves with tea and plain biscuits. Afterwards she fell asleep, and remained blissfully unconscious of all surroundings till well on her way to Paris ; the only drawback to her full content being dreams, which recalled with ludicrous variations the unpleasant truths that had been enunciated by her Aunt Rachel on the preceding evening ; and Queenie would have been much better pleased had her repose been quite undisturbed, for she wished to forget at once and for evermore all that Mrs. Fairfax had taken upon herself to say. Miss Osborne "could not abide" salutary counsel, and she determined that she would never—*no, never*, listen to the like again.

But a good deal awaited Queenie for which she had by no means bargained, when she elected to become Madame Pierrot's pupil and boarder. She had not been many hours an inmate of the *Maison d'Or* before she made the disagreeable discovery that Madame was, after all, nothing better than a schoolmistress ; and that her establishment, though conducted on a very superior footing, was still *only* a boarding-school, and she herself, though allowed certain privileges, *only* a school-girl, under a certain amount of control.

She was not compelled to apply herself any longer than she desired to any kind of study. She and Dolly had a very comfortable and airy bedroom to themselves, where they were served every morning with a roll and a cup of good, warm English tea. They were not obliged to appear in the *salon* before nine o'clock ; and if Queenie, who had a musical fit on her, chose to practise till breakfast-time, the pianoforte was entirely at her disposal. Madame Pierrot

kept a "good table" in every sense of the word, and the likes and dislikes of the English boarders were invariably consulted. The six o'clock dinner was not only plentiful, but nicely served and exquisitely cooked, and there was a slight and even dainty repast for all who required any further refreshment before bedtime. Still, there were *rules*, though not many; and they could not be disregarded. Madame Pierrot and Mademoiselle, her *aide-de-camp*, were kind; but they were firm, too, and held the law in their own hands; and, worse than all, Queenie soon found out that French girls were systematically under restraint, and that very little allowance was made for the English girls' insular peculiarities. There were a thousand-and-one-things that Queenie could not do, although she had done them all her life as a matter of course; and many of the common regulations of the house seemed to her arbitrary and unnecessary in the extreme.

And yet, as she was very speedily informed, discipline was relaxed for her and for "Mees Derrington" as it had never been relaxed before in any *pension* for *demoiselles*. If they would like another course at dinner; if the *déjeuner* at noon was not just what they preferred; if they wanted to change their sleeping-room; if they required more personal attendance—they had only to mention it, for were they not *des grandes pensionnaires*? which was supposed to be the equivalent for the *parlour-boarders*, who are permitted all kinds of privileges in English schools.

But, no! To go out unaccompanied by Madame or by her principal subordinates—Miss Middlemore was evidently a person of very small importance, and not to be trusted in circumstances that required a careful regard for *les covenances*—to require their private letters to be put into their own hands by a *fille-de-chambre* or by another domestic, was not to be thought of. Nor could Queenie be allowed to go her own way on the Sunday. The dull room, yclept "Congregational Chapel," in the Rue Royale, which Miss Middlemore and Dolly regularly attended, was not at all to Miss Osborne's taste; and she protested passionately when required to accompany her English friends to the little sanctuary, which she was assured was and *must be* her sole

église until her return to her own country and her own natural guardians.

Madame Pierrot had now under her roof a few French girls of "good family," and, almost as a matter of course, Roman Catholics. These young ladies, escorted by *Made-moiselle André*, attended various places of worship of their own *religion*, and not unfrequently were allowed to join in worship at the *Madeleine* or at *Notre Dame* whenever there was a ceremonial of more than ordinary interest ; for four out of Madame's six French boarders came from the provinces, and were glad to make the best of their opportunities while resident in Paris.

And with these *demoiselles* Queenie yearned to go ; for now that she could no longer attend her own dear church at home, why should she not profit by a totally different kind of service ? Why should she not listen to the glorious music ? Why should she not assist at *High Mass* ? It would be a grand experience, if it were nothing more ; and, surely, one should reap the full benefit of living in a foreign land ? But Madame was immovable ; Miss Osborne's friends were of non-episcopal persuasion, and she must remain precisely in the same position as they, during her absence from her own family. She—*Madame*—was responsible for her pupils while under her care, and it was her duty to see that their religious principles were not tampered with in the smallest particular. She was herself "Episcopal" ; and though she believed that the Episcopal religion was, of all others, the most acceptable to God, she would no more take Miss Osborne and Miss Derrington under her protection, on the Sunday, than she would permit them to accompany the French girls to the *Madeleine* ! They were Nonconformists, and Nonconformists they must remain ; they must be entirely under Miss Middlemore's religious control on Sunday : go with her, morning and evening, to the *Rue Royale*, and listen with all due reverence and attention to the acceptable discourses of the excellent M. Hart, of whose instructions they might avail themselves on various other occasions. Or—if they wanted a change, now and then—there was the *Oratoire*, with very good Protestant services, as she believed ; but as

Miss Middlemore was entirely responsible for them, on one day of the week, they ought to submit themselves implicitly to her will and guidance.

So "*they*"—which meant Queenie alone—had to forego the Mass, although it was within an easy distance. Dolly, for her part, was fully content with the liberty accorded to her, and went without any grumbling to avail herself of the spiritual privileges permitted. Queenie, on the contrary, fretted and fumed over the restraint imposed, and made her protest nearly every Sunday morning. In the evening she was allowed to do as she liked—either going to the *Rue Royale*, or to the *Oratoire*; or staying at home with the French girls, who never dreamed of going to church in the after part of the day.

"I shall never be able to bear this intolerable state of bondage," said Queenie, one Sunday morning, as she and Dolly were preparing for the service. "I do abominate that *Rue Royale* place! it is not any better than a common house, and the singing is stupid in the extreme; and I don't care a bit for the minister. It is all very fine of father to say we *must* stay on for the full year, now we have once commenced the terms agreed upon; but he does not know what it is to have no will of one's own, and to be obliged to go in leading strings, as if one were a child of ten. I am sick of it already! I shall write and tell him how we are coerced, in more ways than one, and Britons—you know—never will be slaves."

"But, my dear Queenie, I do not see that we have ground for complaint in this one particular—Madame guarantees that our faith shall not be tampered with; and if she allowed us to go to the different churches the French girls attend, she might very possibly find herself in difficulty; for I am quite sure—positive!—father would never hear of our being taken to any Roman Catholic place of worship."

"We might do worse than go sometimes to *La Messe*. There could not possibly be any harm in our attending the Madeleine, or Notre Dame, or St. Roch upon occasion, just to please ourselves, and see what the service is like. They would not turn *me* Catholic in a hurry; so Madame

need not be so scrupulous on my account. Perhaps she fancies I should be an easy convert."

"You forget that she is a Protestant herself, and that she abstains from taking us to the Anglican Church because we are of another communion. She respects the trust reposed in her; father would scarcely find fault with her for that. And I dare say we shall spend a few days in perfect freedom before we finally quit Paris; and we shall be able to attend service at the *Madeleine*, or anywhere else we choose; and perhaps even visit Fontainebleau, which Mademoiselle André tells us is so charming. Don't fret, Queenie, dear; twelve months will soon pass away; nearly three months have elapsed already since we left the dear old home. Let us get all the good we can in France, and let us be as happy as we may be, so far from all our friends. Make the best of it, Queenie, darling; and let me fasten that new pelerine for you—the long ends and the bow are all awry."

Sometimes Queenie would forget to bemoan her frequent wrongs, and, after awhile, she seemed to grow gradually content; though she never quite ceased to protest against the frequent infringement of her liberties as "a British subject," and a rich heiress, on her own account; to say nothing of the mature age of eighteen, to which she would very shortly attain. She studied very little, and that only by fits and starts; she took lessons in languages and in various accomplishments, but showed so little perseverance that her masters deplored her want of progress, although she was a universal favourite with all the professors, every one of whom was credited with being more or less—her admirer! But she was clever—indisputably so; that is to say, she was *quick*, and learned, when she condescended to take the trouble, with a facility that astonished governesses, professors, and schoolfellows, alike; and not less than others, Dolly, whom she fairly distanced perpetually; and Miss Middlemore, who believed that her present instructors were finding out, at last, the right way to lead to her improvement.

Before Christmas, Miss Middlemore, greatly to Dolly's sorrow, returned to England; she had only come to Paris

for a limited period, and having accomplished that for which she came, she felt it incumbent on her, for certain reasons, to go back to her own home, where she was actually required. Queenie was, on the whole, relieved by the English governess's departure; for the Miss Beaumont, who succeeded, allowed her pupils an amount of liberty that was rather latitude than freedom. She was a weak, pliable sort of person, and the girls frequently accused her of partiality; for it was very speedily discovered that Regina Osborne could do no wrong, and that Regina herself, when wayward, or idle, or bent on mischief, could always coax or bribe her to silence, or obtain a certain licence on her own private account; and there were times, the girls declared, when Miss Beaumont absolutely winked at her favourite's disregard of rules, and allowed her to practise divers underhand tricks with impunity.

A great deal might be written, which we think is far better omitted, of this period of Felicia Regina Osborne's life. Her school-girl history was by no means lacking in adventure; and after Miss Middlemore's departure she began to give herself airs, and assume the character of a young lady emancipated from schoolroom control, and simply residing with Madame Pierrot for the benefit of further improvement in the language—which, it must be confessed, she spoke fluently enough; though not always with the pure diction and grammatical accuracy that could be desired.

Christmas came and passed, and Dolly and Queenie attained their eighteenth birthday; and Dolly, who was still working hard to obtain a complete mastery of the French tongue, began to hope she saw an approach to the conclusion of her arduous labours, and to count first the weeks and then the days which must elapse before she said good-bye for ever to the *Maison d'Or*. They were to go home at Easter, she and Queenie, and the year of exile would then be fully accomplished. Dolores felt that she had availed herself of her opportunities to the fullest extent, and she was preparing for her return with her heart at peace, and a really satisfied conscience.

She was awakened rather rudely from her dream of

prospective bliss. One morning, Queenie, who had been more than ordinarily capricious of late in her behaviour to Dolores, handed her a letter, received the day before from her father, and rather abruptly begged her to peruse it. There was a slight confusion in Queenie's manner that somewhat mystified her friend; for Miss Osborne's mind was not easily disturbed, and Dolly had already gathered that the news from home was altogether favourable, and everybody quite well and happy.

She found at once that the letter in question was written in reply to one just received from Queenie, *pleading*—yes! actually pleading—for an extension of their present residence. Queenie was so happy, and felt that she was profiting so greatly under Madame Pierrot's guidance; and Dolly, moreover, was learning so much, that she was sure she would feel most keenly being so speedily disturbed in her beloved studies, and it would be "*so good*" for both to be allowed another twelve months! Mr. Osborne evidently consented with reluctance, and he had his misgivings. It pained him more than he could tell that "his girls"—Dolly and Queenie were always classed together, and considered as twin sisters—his dear girls, should be willing to forego the joys of their own home for yet another year! But, nevertheless, he would not selfishly stand in the way of their actual benefit, and it was a thousand pities that they should not bring to perfection all that was commenced, and, so far, happily carried on. Well, perhaps, they might stay on at the *Maison d'Or* till Christmas, and then, surely, they would have finished the work they wanted to do; they must be content with the compromise, for another full year in Paris was quite out of the question. Yes; dear mother was wonderfully better, and longing to hold her daughters in her loving arms once more. He had thought of coming over himself, and bringing her, and perhaps Aunt Rachel, to spend a few weeks at some French seaside resort, which doubtless they or Madame Pierrot could recommend; but Grahame thought it was too great a risk to take *mother* so far, and he felt sure a few weeks at Tenby would be infinitely preferable on every account. But the girls could come home for the Midsummer holidays if they saw fit,

though, indeed, it would be scarcely worth while taking the long journey back again for the three months of study which remained.

When Dolly had read the letter twice over, and fairly understood its meaning, she was very much inclined to write back to Mr. Osborne and plainly and fully disavow her complicity in the request that had been preferred. But Queenie, as was always the case, prevailed; and partly by dint of loving persuasion, and partly by force of indignant remonstrance, induced her to keep silence and let matters remain, as it had been settled they should remain, for at least a few months longer.

During the summer recess both girls accompanied Mdlle. Nathalie, Madame's trusted ally and coadjutor, on a short tour in the neighbourhood, and even travelled as far as Lyons, under the care of this experienced governess. And it must be confessed that under her chaperonage they enjoyed a liberty hitherto unexampled in their school-life, and were introduced, with Madame's full sanction, to several of her friends, who, in turn, introduced *their* friends to the beautiful *demoiselles Anglaises*, one of whom was not only incomparably lovely and talented, but was also the heiress to an immense fortune!

And Queenie, as might, perhaps, have been expected, burst all bounds, and, according to the rules of strict French etiquette, so entirely compromised herself as to alarm Mdlle. Nathalie, who at once implored Madame Pierrot to interfere.

Madame was seriously displeased—worse! she felt that she and her select *pension* were being injured by Miss Osborne's thoughtless "and more than thoughtless" behaviour. *Madame* had become a veritable Frenchwoman; and she could not excuse Queenie's undoubted improprieties, and, when she knew all, could not find words strong enough to express her virtuous indignation.

Mdlle. Nathalie, though an *intime*, narrowly escaped immediate dismissal; and, though for the sake of former services, forgiveness was tardily accorded, it was quite understood that never again would Mdlle. Nathalie be entrusted with the charge of Madame's *élèves*!

Queenie went back to the *Maison d'Or* in dire disgrace ; while even Dolly was viewed with a good deal of silent suspicion ; though, on a little closer investigation, it was agreed that Mdlle. Derrington was scarcely, if at all, to be blamed.

But Madame felt acutely the position in which she had been placed, for was not her own reputation involved ? Who could say how far news of the terrible *esclandre* might spread ? The result was, that on her return to *Maison d'Or*, Queenie found herself under watchful espionage, and was virtually "sent to Coventry," as she complained to Dolly, with whom alone she was now allowed freely to associate. Her folly and vanity had once more involved her in unpleasant consequences, and she was as eager to return to England as she had been, after the episode of "Count Stanger," to escape from it.

She was not left, however, to make her own arrangements, for while she was yet pondering the style and character of the communication she was about to make, Madame took the whole affair into her own hands. She wrote to Mr. Osborne regretting her inability to retain *Mademoiselle sa fille* any longer in the bosom of her family. The great beauty of *mademoiselle* and her natural *inconséquence*, added to her reputation as a wealthy heiress, rendered the further charge of her a responsibility too serious to be incurred. She therefore entreated M. Osborne to come—or send the young lady's brother—as soon as might be convenient, to escort her to her own home. She had no wish to part with Mdlle. Dolores, who was also a "*belle demoiselle, mais aussi discrète, et bien sage.*" She could remain at *Maison d'Or* for any length of time that her friends thought proper ; but Mdlle. Osborne was most certainly to be placed, *without delay*, under the immediate protection of her own family !

And so it came to pass that both girls returned to their native country, and a little earlier than had been anticipated, for "Mdlle. Dolores" would not hear of being left behind for even the few weeks of the term that still remained. To her great satisfaction she was once more on English ground, and laden with all sorts of flattering testimonials from the principal and professors of the *Maison d'Or*.

But Queenie returned virtually *expelled* ! her "retirement" from the *pension* being, however, generally ascribed to her extreme beauty, which attracted too much observation from the world in general ; to compliments which, in a school for young ladies was, to say the least of it, "decidedly inexpedient."



CHAPTER XXVII.

GIRLS' "WILD OATS."

QUEENIE'S "expulsion" from the *Maison d'Or* was not at all generally understood to be a veritable fact, beyond the circle of her own family. Of course, Dolly could have told a tale that would have made Mr. Osborne's eldest sons indignant to the last degree ; but Philip was the only one of Regina's brothers admitted unreservedly to the secret, and Dolly kept her own counsel as far as it was possible. Some of the Osbornes' intimates had their private suspicions on the subject, and expressed some astonishment at the sudden return of the young ladies from Paris, when their last term had actually commenced, and would have reached its natural termination had they remained with Madame Pierrot only a few weeks longer.

But the few persons who might have made inconvenient disclosures prudently held their peace ; and, truth to tell, Mr. Osborne never showed, even to his wife, a certain private and confidential letter which he received from Madame within two or three days of her reception of the expected cheque, with the assurance that both her late pupils had arrived in perfect safety at their own home on Clapham Common. Madame thought it her *duty* to conceal nothing from the estimable parents of *la belle demoiselle*. They ought to be enlightened as to their daughter's un-

doubted proclivities ; a young lady at once so rich and so beautiful might so easily become the prey of some unscrupulous adventurer, and all kinds of misfortune might be anticipated—nay, were little less than inevitable—if she were allowed to go her own way unrestrained and unwatched, as was commonly permitted to English girls, even in the upper classes of society. And Madame more than hinted that the wisest plan for *Mademoiselle's* respected *père* and *mère* would be to arrange, without further delay, a suitable marriage for their too brilliant and too fascinating daughter ; as to leave her, according to insular custom, to select according to her own inclinations ; to make her own choice among the crowd of suitors who would undoubtedly be drawn to her feet by her manifold charms, was, past dispute, altogether inexpedient ; and in no wise to be allowed. *Mademoiselle Osborne* ought to be forthwith "established" with all possible discretion ; and, once safely married, she would be in the charge of *Monsieur le Mari*.

Curiously enough, Jonathan Osborne pondered long and gravely over this most un-English and confidential communication ; for Madame Pierrot had lived in France till she was in heart and soul a Frenchwoman, and had relinquished, long ago, all cherished British prejudices. Her letter was written in English, of course ; for she had been given to understand that her esteemed correspondent's knowledge of French was extremely limited ; but the English was so much mixed up with French, and abounded so largely in idiomatic phrases, that, after some deliberation, he concluded to consult Dolly and obtain the interpretation of certain unintelligible—or all but unintelligible sentences. Dolly was to be trusted, he knew ; she had so much good sound commonsense, and withal had made such excellent use of her foreign experiences, that he was sure he might rely on her for any explanation that he needed—if not for sober counsel. As for Chrissie seeing the letter—which would after all have been but of little avail—it was entirely out of the question ; she was much better and stronger than she had been two years before ; but it was her husband's rule never to disturb her mind with any perplexity that could possibly be concealed from her.

So, to Dolly he went, and, laying the epistle before her, begged her to solve the various problems, about which he felt himself to be in profoundest uncertainty.

"The letter is meant to be 'private and confidential,' you see," he began—when, having waited in profound silence till the last word of the postscript had been considered, he began to ask various questions. "Dolly! I can't make much sense of it; the sentences are so oddly put together, and the whole thing is so utterly unlike anything you would expect from an Englishwoman, that I really cannot make top nor tail of it. It seems to me that Madame Pierrot seriously advises me to arrange a *marriage* for Queenie, as quickly and as agreeably as may be!"

"And that is just what she does advise, father. It is the French custom, you know, to *arrange* marriages for young people. As a rule, a girl sees nobody and nothing of the world till she is *fiancée*—which we should call 'engaged,' only the engagement is not made by the parties themselves, but by their near relations, who regulate the whole affair, introduce an eligible *futur*, see to the settlements, and all that sort of thing, and make all preparations for the nuptials."

"And do the young people consent to be disposed of in this queer fashion?" asked Mr. Osborne.

"Yes, nearly always. A girl who rebels or hesitates to accept the *futur* provided for her, is held to be on all hands a naughty, ill-brought-up, badly conducted sort of person."

"Do speak English, child!" interrupted Jonathan, testily; "what do you mean by a *futoor*?"

"One's *futur* is one's intended husband—that is, the husband that the parents, or, perhaps, the nearest friends of the *démoiselle*—I mean young lady—have selected for her. She has possibly never seen him before he is proposed—he does not propose himself, of course; but if her relations and guardians are satisfied, she is satisfied also, or, is at least expected to be satisfied."

"And that is really the custom in what Queenie calls *la belle France*?"

"That is the custom, though, I suppose, there are occa-

sionally exceptions to the rule. Now and then I know girls fight for their own way, but they very seldom succeed in doing as they wish. And the training is altogether so different, that it is next to impossible to form a just comparison between their ways and our own. I, for one, should infinitely prefer to be an English maiden; I am afraid I should prove restive if I were not even allowed the freedom of refusal. In our country, if one cannot marry in accordance with one's own liking, one can at least decide to be an old maid."

"And there are reasons, as I can well believe, why a girl should resolve to be an old maid—good reasons, too. Also, there are exceptions in all cases; and though I think the French system a most undesirable one, and by no means tending to conjugal happiness, or even morality—I am not sure but that it may be viewed in another aspect, and may, under peculiar circumstances, be regarded as advantageous. For instance, it would be far better for Queenie herself that I should choose her a husband, than that she should be left to make her own selection, and, perhaps, fall into a blunder that may cost her a lifetime of regret. What do you say, Dolly?"

"I say, father, that would in no wise answer. If Queenie were introduced to a young man, to whom it was understood that she was pre-contracted by the elders, she would at once strenuously resist; and nothing would induce her to carry out the previous arrangement. She would take a dislike, a positive distaste, to her lover on the spot, and would steadfastly refuse him, even as an aspirant. No, father; Queenie must marry the man she prefers herself, or—there is no saying what may happen."

"Tell me one thing, Dolly; if you can tell me without in any way abusing confidence—for I know girls have their secrets one with another—have you any reason to believe that there is one among Queenie's innumerable admirers to whom her heart privately inclines?"

"Frankly, father, I believe there is no one whom she actually and veritably prefers. She likes to be courted and flattered, and she regards with special favour those who make most fuss about her. Madame need not have been

so much alarmed on her account, though I must say Queenie did transgress most terribly, according to a French-woman's code of etiquette ; but among all her foreign beaux—they were only *beaux*, you know !—there was not one to whom she would have cared to yield actual encouragement. She has said more than once when she has been alone with me, and discussing her various love affairs, that she would marry none but an Englishman—though she could not but admit that the French pose most enchantingly, as *lovers* ! ”

“ Does she ever refer to that miserable episode of two years ago ? ”

“ Never ! in the sense that you would intend. His name has only once been mentioned between us. She has bemoaned her sapphires, often—her supposed lover, not at all. In fact, I should say she shudders at the bare recollection of her folly. I think she would rejoice if she knew that he was paying the just penalty of his crimes within prison walls, provided always that she were not summoned to give evidence against him ; and provided, also, that the jewels, especially the sapphires, could be restored to her.”

“ Then, as far as you know, she has no one favoured sweetheart.”

“ I should say she has no sweetheart at all ! if I except one youthful Frenchman, who was in the army, and whom we met when we spent a day or two with some friends of Mdlle. Nathalie ; and he, poor boy, I do believe, worshipped the very ground upon which she trod. Mademoiselle was more than half afraid—I think he was some distant relation of hers—that he might go so far as to commit suicide when he found out that she really laughed at him and his pretensions. He was, indeed, little more than a lad ; he owned to being rather younger than his divinity ; indeed, he was what we should call at home a schoolboy—a sort of military student. But, boy as he was, I really pitied him ; and I almost respected his devoted attachment.”

“ And Queenie did not care for him ? ”

“ Not in the least ; though she smiled kindly enough upon him, and, indeed, got herself in a scrape chiefly on his account. He was handsome, and he was accomplished too,

could dance and sing, and rode fine horses; I believe he had plenty of money. But when he ventured to address a *billet* to his adored lady-love—to assure her that he had *vowed* to follow her to England, and seek her for his own from her natural guardians, she frowned upon him, and laughed his suit to scorn."

"I should not care to give my daughter to a foreigner; but I should treat him with all respect, if I knew that he were an estimable individual, and sincerely in love with my troublesome little girl."

"That he was sincerely 'in love,' there cannot be a doubt; but he will never come to England to seek his beautiful idol; he is too well convinced that he would receive no welcome from her. Besides, Mdlle. Nathalie assured me that he is betrothed to a young lady to whom he has never spoken, whom he has not even seen, and whose education is almost finished. She is in a convent somewhere near Pau; but she will come out early in the spring, and be married to this unfortunate M. Victor, who will have no alternative."

"Poor fellow! I am afraid our naughty Queenie flirted with him, as you young ladies have it. And if she chooses to make a conquest here and there, she will do it, I am afraid, with very little compunction. You are handsome, my Dolly—decidedly handsome, but you are not irresistible."

"Thank God that I am not! It is almost a misfortune to be so very lovely. I am not quite sure, father, that those upon whom Nature lavishes so many gifts are, after all, really and truly the happiest."

"I am sometimes a little afraid, Dolly, that I have not been as wise as I might have been with regard to my poor Queenie. I have indulged her too much; she has been accustomed to think of herself as of the first importance. There has been a fault somewhere in her training; I see too late that it has been so. I do wish she were well and wisely married."

"All in good time, father. Queenie is not yet nineteen. Mother Derrington thinks that if a girl, in any position remain single till she is two or three-and-twenty it is all the

better for her. She sets herself against very early marriages."

"And so do I. For my own sake and for my wife's, I should like to keep *you* here with us till you are full twenty-five, for I do not fancy you will ever put us to any anxiety, little Dolly. I should like to see you comfortably settled before I die, and in your own husband's home; but I cannot help thinking, dear, that as regards Queenie, Madame Pierrot is not so very far wrong. She must marry, and the sooner the better. God send her a good, loving, Christian husband."

And Dolly's heart said, "*Amen*," though whether a truly Christian gentleman would be really justified in casting in his lot with the beautiful, wealthy heiress was a moot point which she could not, to her own satisfaction, settle. Dolly could not feel at all sure, in her inmost heart, that sweet Queenie would make a thoroughly good wife.

A few weeks and Christmas came again, and with it, as a matter of course, the mutual birthday of Regina and Dolores. On Christmas-day they were nineteen; but the festival was very quietly observed. Even Queenie held her peace when Philip asked her if she was thinking of celebrating the occasion. She thought, as did everybody else in the house, that Mrs. Osborne would be better without the bustle and excitement of a birthday entertainment.

The season, too, always reminded Queenie of the humiliating experiences of two years ago, yet she flattered herself that she had gained immeasurable wisdom since those days. She thought of the exquisite pearls which she had worn so proudly on the day of their presentation, and only twice afterwards; and of the sapphires, the matchless "star-sapphires," the inherited gems which she had worn but once, and would never, never, she sadly feared, wear more.

Miss Osborne had her "own maid" again; for, taking into account the wealth she would surely possess, if she lived, it seemed both to her father and her mother that a personal attendant was really her due; and they had made the selection themselves this time. Within a week of Queenie's return to "The Acacias," Maria Franklin, the

daughter of the head door-keeper of the Osbornes' own church, was installed as the heiress's lady's maid.

And Regina, who did not in the least wish to penetrate the mystery of Susanna South, was content to be secure in the possession of such ornaments as remained to her, and to know that they were quite safe in Maria's custody. Though Maria—or Miss Franklin, as the other servants voluntarily called her—certainly lacked much of the singular dexterity and wonderful taste of her predecessor. She could not dress hair as well, and she had not Susanna's delicate touch ; in fact, she was the least bit slow, and could not arrange a *toilette* with nearly so much skill and readiness. In short, Maria was not a genius ; but she was thoroughly respectable, and attended to her duties with unremitting diligence ; and though she had never dressed a mythical Lady Selina Severn or a grateful Mrs. Barrington, she was far from unsatisfactory as a young lady's "bower-woman."

The servants generally thought Miss Osborne far more "reasonable" than she had ever been before ; and old Nurse said she was wonderfully improved by her residence in France ; she was so gentle and humble, and so willing to listen to advice from those older and more experienced than herself. As for Dolores, there was never too much to be said in her praise ; everybody was glad to welcome her back from the Continent, and only sorry that Miss Annie had made up her mind to leave "The Acacias," as soon as the Christmas holidays should be ended. None of the domestics, not even Nurse, knew the secret of Queenie's abrupt return ; they only supposed that school-terms in France were quite otherwise than they were in their own country—that is, if they supposed anything at all.

But Mrs. Fairfax was acquainted with the whole history of Queenie's dismissal, and had regarded the untoward circumstance with the very gravest disapproval ; it seemed to her that the disgrace of the expulsion was one which could never be absolutely blotted out. "Such a shade upon her prospects !" she would say sometimes, when discussing the painful event with her brother. "It is like being expelled from the University !"

"Nay, nay, Rachel," would Jonathan reply, "not so bad

as that, surely—not even so bad as young Russell's affair was, and he was only expelled from Rugby! Queenie has done no actual wrong; she has, as far as I can ascertain, simply violated certain rules of *etiquette*—and French etiquette, too—which is by no means the same as English propriety, or good behaviour. There would be no explanations needed, no conscientious scruples on our part—on mine, at least—should she receive such an offer of marriage as we should joyfully approve. Besides, no one outside our own family knows that I have been requested to remove her from the *Maison d'Or*, and, of course, no one ever will."

"Well, Jonathan, I will say no more; and, of course, it is altogether foolish to make you moan over milk that is actually spilt. But I do think, and I must say it, that Queenie should be subjected to a firmer discipline; she should be taught to stand in awe of somebody, and till she is married, that 'somebody' should be her own father, who is certainly responsible for her conduct."

"Dear me, Rachel!" retorted the father, "to hear you talk one would think the poor child was almost an improper character! She is wilful, I grant; capricious, and, perhaps, a little too vain of her pretty face; but, then, she really is far more beautiful than the ordinary run of young girls; and young folks will be young folks, in spite of all the laws and regulations the seniors take the trouble to lay down. And I won't say she is not a trifle headstrong—and, perhaps, a little overbearing;—but when that is said all is said; she will do well enough when she is a little older, and knows more of the world."

"I have vexed you, Jonathan; but I have only said what I thought I ought to say; and if you will not turn over a new leaf before it is quite too late, nothing that I can urge will be of any use. You know, better than I can tell you, that as the twig is bent so is the tree inclined. And an ounce of prevention is worth more than a pound of cure."

"I am convinced of it, Rachel; and, believe me, I have been not a little hard on myself, looking back on past errors. I *have* spoiled Queenie—I confess it! I have

granted her so many indulgences, that she has no idea of self-restraint; I have allowed her—I fear, almost encouraged her—to live for herself alone; but I regret my weakness, and trust to be stronger and wiser for the future. A girl of nineteen is not yet too old to be somewhat coerced."

"I do not know. It seems to me, Jonathan, that discipline should be chiefly exercised during the period of childhood. Don't you know *our* mother used to say—accustom your children to implicit obedience till they are at least twelve years old! Then hold the reins more loosely, and leave them—save under exceptional circumstances—to guide and govern themselves. Give your counsel, influence them by your example; but do not seek any longer to control them. Do you not remember, Jonathan?"

"Yes, I remember. My mother was a wise woman, and she taught me many a lesson in the days of my youth. Do not fear that I am going to be *strict* with my poor Queenie—the day is past for that, I am well aware; but my child must be amenable to my authority, and listen to my counsels. And she has a noble nature, notwithstanding her little faults. She is generous and loving, and is more devoted to her mother than ever before, I think."

"Queenie would be a far worse person than she is, if she were not penetrated with a sense of her mother's sweetness and goodness. Your Chrissie is the best woman I know, Jonathan, and in spite of her fragile frame, she has a stronger soul than her husband: she is mentally stronger than any of us, I fancy."

"She is both better and loftier in her soul than I am, at any rate. God has given me a treasure of a wife, that I cannot too highly prize, and my boys are good boys—she has brought them up well. If ever my dear Queenie goes wrong—but I will not think of such a thing—it is I who will have to bear the blame; not Chrissie, who has done her very best to train up her child in the way she should go. If she get through this winter tolerably, Rachel, I shall begin to hope that she is really recovering from the illness she had last January twelvemonths. Do you not think her health very much improved?"

"Indeed, I do. One thing is, she has had a really peaceful time of it during the last year, and Annie Derrington has watched her with unremitting tenderness and the devotion of a daughter. She has been gradually getting over the shock she received on that awful night of the robbery, ever since the girls went away to France. The presence of Queenie somehow kept the remembrance of it in her mind ; and she told Nurse that the sound of the pistol-shots would be in her ears as long as she lived. I am so thankful she was spared the sight of that man with the crape all about his face. It was almost too much for Nurse ; but Nurse has pretty strong nerves, though she is so much troubled with rheumatism, and though her advancing years are telling upon her."

"Do you know, Rachel, that I never like to recall that night myself ? And all things considered, I am rather glad that the robbers escaped, though I must say I should like to recover, at least, a little of their booty. I scarcely know which I regret the most, the disappearance of the sapphires or the pearls ; though, of course, the gems were so much the more valuable, as being in some sort *heirlooms*, and the pearls may be some day replaced. I shall buy no more ; I was a foolish old fellow to make the purchase I did ; but Queenie will be rich enough, presently, to buy as many jewels as she may desire, and I know she has a hankering after diamonds."

"I hope she may grow wiser as she grows older ! I almost wonder the very thought of expensive jewellery does not make her sick."

"So it did, at first ; but that is pretty well over now. It is very strange that we never succeeded in penetrating the mystery of the affair. But, as I told you, I never did honestly like that Susanna South, as she called herself. And as for the *pseudo* Count, I cannot think how my own dear Queenie could ever be deceived, even for an hour. I knew him at once for an impostor of some sort. I thought he probably had an eye for Queenie's fortune—for though she was not then Mrs. Merridew's acknowledged heiress, I dare say people knew pretty well that I had made a tidy little heap, and would certainly give my only daughter

something respectable ; and perhaps he was a little struck with her beauty—but I did not suspect him of being one of a gang of burglars."

"Nor did you suspect him of being a married man !"

"Of course not. But, married or single, he had no business here. I ought not to have allowed Queenie to send out her invitations right and left for that unlucky ball ; though I was not the only person befooled—Lady Harcourt admitted him to her circle ; and that aunt of Miss L'Estrange, with whom she visited Buxton, must have been somewhat of a goose. I should not like to trust a daughter of mine to her care. But if 'Aunt Louisa'—I really forget her proper style and title—was in any way a goose, I, Jonathan Osborne, was indubitably a *gander*. No person whose antecedents were absolutely unknown ought ever to have been received in this house, and allowed to associate with our intimate friends."

"Did you really send him an invitation — or did Chrissie ?"

"No. Although I had heard the fellow's name—or supposed name—from Queenie, and Florence, and Adelaide Harcourt, and two or three others, I had scarcely given him a thought. I was dumbfounded when Queenie carelessly gave me to understand that he had '*a card*' from herself for the 6th instant ! I was vexed—almost angry, you know ; but it seemed too late to make a stir about it, and I could see that the child was set upon it. I thought he would come and go, and there would be an end of the whole matter. The worst I feared was that he might not be exactly of the rank to which he laid claim ; and when once I had seen the handsome 'Count' I distrusted him from the tip of his jetty curls to the point of his varnished boots. Of course the invaluable 'Miss South' had given him his cue, and he knew that he would never be in the house again till he entered it as a professed thief."

"There is no doubt that 'Miss South' was Stanger's wife, or mistress ; the police gave her credit for being the former. She was here from first to last as that bad man's accomplice, she disappeared with him, and I do not imagine we shall ever see her again."

"It is strange, though, that she left no clue behind her ; and Captain Spenser thinks that there is a whole gang of burglars somewhere—a society so well organised as for the present to baffle detection, and even strong suspicion."

"I wonder if the pair have returned to England?—for they have certainly been out of it ever since they disappeared with the Merridew sapphires, and the pearls, and one or two other trifles. I shall never forget Susanna's pale, calm face, and dark, smooth hair ; I should know her under any disguise, I am convinced. Let me once catch a glimpse of her—let me be indubitably satisfied that it is *she* and none else, and I will give her straightway into charge. She shall be introduced to the very first policeman I can discover."

"Take care, Rachel ; be sure you make no mistake. Be satisfied that you give the *right* woman into charge."

"I said I would be '*indubitably satisfied*.' I do not very often blunder, you know. I feel almost sure I shall encounter Madame Susanna—some day."

"And I feel convinced we shall never hear or see any more of either man or woman ; or of the sapphires and pearls either, I fear. But how thankful I am that that villain's revolver missed its aim ; poor Philip was very near having a bullet through his brains—his face was actually blackened by the discharge. If he had fallen, I do believe the shock would have killed his mother. I shall never forget Annie Derrington's bravery ; she crossed the very path of the intruders, you know, and made straight for the great alarm-bell. What might have ensued had she not loosed that spring, I never dare to guess, for Philip and I were opposed to fearful odds ; there were certainly half-a-dozen robbers in the house, and all rushed out at the hall-door when the loud clanging of that bell was heard. They knew it must peal on, and on, till the whole neighbourhood was roused. Thank God for the *mercies* of that fearful hour !"

"Don't talk any more about it, Jonathan ; you look pale and grey at the mere remembrance of that night."

"A reference to that Sunday night always unnerves me. I suppose I am rather too old for such upsets. I have not

talked so much about 'Stanger' and his set for at least a year. Spenser and I agreed to let the matter rest—only, of course, the Scotland Yard people are always on the alert."

And at this point the conversation was dropped. Mrs. Fairfax told herself that quite enough had been said on this most disagreeable subject, for, as she often remarked, Jonathan was by no means as young as he had been, and *his* nerves—though he would not own to the possession of any—were far more easily agitated than of yore. If the matter was ever taken up again, it must be for the sons—all strong men and in their prime—to take action and not for the father, who had already seen his sixtieth birthday.

And, on the whole, those winter months passed quietly and uneventfully. Chrissie's health continued to improve in spite of the cold; and the whole household went "the even tenor" of its way for some time after the return of Queenie and Dolly from the *Maison d'Or*.

At first little was said about the French sojourn; scarcely any allusion was made to the various events which had transpired on the other side of the Channel, and nothing at all passed, even between the girls themselves, as to the actual cause of Madame's displeasure. At Miss Osborne's own request, no large entertainment was given either for Christmas or for the New Year. Never had Dolly known her so content and cheerful, so satisfied with home pleasures, so ready to forego the gaieties and dissipations, which aforetime had cost her so dear. Her temper was much more even, she was less irritable than she had been formerly, and she was once again something of the "household sunbeam" that she had been in the old days under Miss Middlemore's easy rule.

As weeks and months passed on, it was quite evident that Madame Pierrot had refrained largely, if not entirely, from comments, even among her own friends, on her late pupil's misconduct; even Miss Middlemore, her kinswoman, and the *intime* of the Osbornes', had only the vaguest ideas as to what really had transpired. No one in fact *knew*, though some might haply guess at the true reason of Regina's

premature return. Presently, there ensued abundant talk about Parisian experiences, and both girls continued their habit of French conversation.

Mr. Osborne was delighted with his darling's irreproachable conduct; advancing womanhood had made "almost an angel of her," he told his wife; with her schooldays she had relinquished her childish follies; she had laid aside with her vanishing girlhood all the bad habits and evil tendencies that had threatened to mar the beauty of her character.

"There is not a particle of vanity in her whole composition," declared Jonathan, when he was expressing to his sister his extreme satisfaction with the alteration that had taken place. "I always said she was not actually vain, Rachel; she only displayed the natural complacency with herself, which is but natural in a young girl of such striking beauty and with prospects so inviting. She has quite left off what you censorious women are pleased to call 'flirting.' She may display a little natural coquetry now and then; she would be scarcely true to her sex if she did not. Of course, a girl so charming and brilliant cannot be expected to conduct herself with precisely the humdrum propriety of a dowdy. A downright plain girl, like Miss Harcourt's youngest sister, has to be exemplary, in spite of herself. Now, our dear Queenie will always have her temptations, lovely as she is; and she will grow lovelier till she reaches her full prime; she will always have a choice of lovers at her feet—at least, till she is married. I pray that my darling may marry early and *well*;—well in every point of view. God send her the right husband—a Christian man, who will love her for her own sweet sake alone; a man of suitable age and of suitable condition, and fitted in every way to be her guide and protector through life."

A few weeks afterwards, Queenie quietly rejected one of her most eligible suitors. To her father she observed that the young man, though amiable, and in good position, and very "well connected," was quite too young for her; she needed one some few years older than herself, to whom she could look for guidance and counsel, and on whose wisdom and tried goodness she could safely rely. And Jonathan did

not fail to commend his dear daughter's praiseworthy discretion.

To her mother she said : " I do not love him, and that is surely enough without seeking any other reason ; I could not look up to him as I must look up to the man whom I shall select for my husband."

" My dear, I quite agree with you," said Chrissie ; " if you have no real affection for him, that is enough. He appears to me to be estimable generally, and his character is, I am sure, irreproachable. But I should like him to have had a little more experience of life ; he is not yet twenty-two."

" And I should wish my husband to be not less than *thirty*. I shall be in no great hurry, mother ; I assure you I shall be extremely difficult to please. I suppose girls have to sow their wild oats as well as youths—after a fashion, that is, of course ; and I really believe I have sown all mine now. For the future I shall devote myself to *profitable husbandry*."

CHAPTER XXVIII.

BY THE RIVER-SIDE.

THE spring was passing into the summer, and life at " The Acacias " seemed to have settled down into a pleasant though uneventful calm ; it would really appear that the " wild oats " were, indeed, all sown. Queenie flirted no more ; she wore few ornaments, and she dressed so quietly that some of her old friends asked her if she were making ready to join the Society of Friends ; both father and mother began to hope that a real change had passed over her, that a new spring was given to her entire course of conduct.

The intimacy between herself and Adelaide Harcourt

had never been actually resumed since their primary estrangement on the night of the eventful ball. Miss Harcourt had been, in the first instance, quite as much infatuated as was her friend ; but in spite of all that followed, and notwithstanding the shameful exposure of the mock "Count's" real character and very disreputable proclivities, she had never truly forgiven her own desertion, and the open preference for Queenie which that discreditable personage had too plainly manifested. With Florence it was otherwise. Miss L'Estrange had been weak enough to listen for awhile to Stanger's absurd representations, but that was all. She had really a good deal of common-sense, and her suspicions were aroused at once when she found that the adventurer's name was nowhere to be found in any list of any known patrician family. She had been sincerely sorry for poor Queenie, who had lost not only her jewels, but her self-respect ; and during the few months that elapsed between the robbery and the departure from the Continent, a good deal of the old intimacy had been unostentatiously resumed—though not quite with the sanction of the irritated Mrs. L'Estrange.

While Queenie and Dolly were still inmates of the *Maison d'Or*—indeed, before their first year of residence had expired—Florence had married, and settled within an easy distance of Clapham Common. When the girls returned home, Florence was one of the first to welcome them. Matrimony had greatly improved her ; she was far from the thoughtless girl of earlier days, and happy and blessed in her married life, she wished that her former associate should be less frivolous and selfish than of old.

It somehow came to pass that Dolly and she—almost insensibly—drifted into close friendship ; Queenie was still somewhat cool in her manner and rather shy. The young wife found more congeniality in Dolly's society than she had ever been able to enjoy in Queenie's ; and the two became really intimate.

One afternoon, while Dolores was taking early tea with her friend, Mrs. Paterson, the conversation between them took a turn that somewhat startled her. They were talking over old times, and Florence asked : "Is Queenie quite

happy, do you think? has she entirely got over that terrible Stanger affair?"

"Quite, I hope—I think so. But she has never been exactly the same since, I fancy. She received a dreadful shock, you know; it must be horrible to be so entirely deluded and infatuated as she was—altogether betrayed! Poor dear Queenie!—it was a rough awaking from her dazzling dream."

"Has she had no more *dreams*?" asked Mrs. Paterson.

Now, Dolly, though several times questioned as to Queenie's school career, had never breathed one syllable that could lead directly or indirectly to a suspicion of the truth; the secret was still preserved inviolately; the "romance," as it was sometimes called, of that poor young soldier, M. Victor, had never been even hinted at; his name had not been mentioned since Madame's letter of sage advice had been received, and the visit to Mdlle. Nathalie's friends had been named only in the most casual way. So now Dolly replied, after a moment's thought, "One can scarcely answer for one's friends, you know, Florence; and I am pretty sure that some inquiries are better not answered at all. Queenie was not always quite content under Madame Pierrot's authority, and she angered that good lady more than once; but I feel sure that she dreams no vain dreams *now*. She is, to a large extent, I feel assured, awake to the reality of life; her mind has received a more serious bias, and I do hope things will go on well till far better issues are reached. She is more really happy at present than she has been since the birthday ball, I am satisfied—that is, she is calmly, cheerfully content, and is ready to take events just as they occur. Never since childhood have I known her so long at rest without manifesting any desire for fresh excitement. She certainly does nothing to attract her lovers; if they come, they are not encouraged, but simply receive a courteous dismissal; the verb *to flirt* seems to have disappeared from Queenie's vocabulary."

"I am very glad to hear it, for I shall always love Queenie for *auld lang syne*. I wish her nothing worse than to find as good, and loving, and noble-minded a husband as I have

myself. Queenie ought to marry—she is so much richer than most girls. She is so very beautiful, too ; I have never seen anybody so perfectly charming as she is. Charles says he could never have believed in anything so exquisite ; at the same time, he agrees with me that such unrivalled beauty may prove a snare. I suppose, Dolly, she is resigned by this time to the loss of her jewels ? ”

“ She seldom says anything about them, now. I am not very sure that she is actually resigned to the loss ; but I am almost certain that she has relinquished the hope of ever regaining them. Though, I fancy, from something she said not long ago, she would be well content to give up the *pearls* if the sapphires could once again be hers. ”

“ I can quite understand ; they were, in some sense, family jewels. But so long a time has elapsed since their disappearance, that I suppose there is not much chance of the mystery of their whereabouts being solved. I have often wondered how Stanger and his accomplices disposed of those wonderful gems ! It would be extremely difficult to do anything with them in England, I should say. ”

“ Captain Spenser—and he is an excellent authority, you know—said that it would be so difficult as to be next to impossible—especially as regarded the sapphires. How the Count and his clever associates managed to evade pursuit, we can none of us at all imagine ; they must have fled the country with wonderful secrecy, for detectives were at watch at every port, especially at Liverpool, whence it was the general opinion that they would take passage for the United States ; and they must have carried out their plans so swiftly, since the Osborne family most certainly made all the haste that was possible, and spared no expense in the affair. They did not let the grass grow under their feet, by any means ; not only father, but James and John, and above all, Philip, strained every nerve to unravel the plot, and secure the capture of the leaders of the gang. But since that night on which they disappeared so mysteriously from “ The Acacias,” no living person has set eyes upon any one of them. They are nowhere in England, we are confident ; and it would really seem—so persistently has the search for them been prosecuted—that they are nowhere in the world ! ”

"Dolly, I must tell you, one of them is certainly in the world, and, perhaps, at this very moment in England. I am tolerably certain, nay, *positive*, that I saw Stanger myself, not many days ago."

"Where did you see him?"

"I saw him walking up and down Cheyne Row, last Thursday or Friday—I am not sure at this moment which day it was. When I came back home to dinner, I found my husband busily packing up his portmanteau for a journey he was called to undertake very suddenly; he had a good deal to say to me of importance, and I was upset, too, at his unexpected departure. The *rencontre* at Chelsea quite went out of my head, and I thought no more about it till the day before yesterday, when I was preparing for Charles's return. During the evening, I remembered whom I had met, and I told him what had happened. He thought I must be mistaken; but was rather inclined to reprove me for not having at once communicated with some of the family. I expected you yesterday, and if you had not made your appearance to-day, I think I should have tried for an interview with Mr. Philip."

"But are you quite sure you were not mistaken, Florence? Did you really meet the person you supposed to be Stanger *face to face*?"

"Face to face! and though he was much altered, I think I might almost say, *disguised*, I knew him at once. Remember, I saw more—much more—of him, than you did, Dolly! I learned his features by heart, I think, while Aunt Louisa and I were at Buxton; and we met several times at different friends' houses, during the weeks that intervened before Christmas—while he seemed to be courting both Queenie and Adelaide Harcourt. Of course, I saw him, for the last time, at your ball!"

"And you have no doubt that it was really *he*?"

"I could not swear to him, certainly; for at the first moment I simply wondered why the face was so strangely familiar. I did not immediately recognise who he really was; but when I saw him again—for we met twice—on the river-bank—I knew at once that he was unmistakably the *pseudo* Count Stanger of other days; and no one else.

Could I ever forget those little restless black eyes, the 'aristocratic features,' as we used foolishly to style them, and, as if to disperse any lingering doubt, there was the veritable cat's-eye *ring* on his little finger! He never parted with it, you know—or perhaps you do not know; but he told both Queenie and myself that it was an *amulet*, and that nothing could harm him so long as it was about his person; he wore it day and night—*always!*”

“Was he so much altered as to escape identification, do you think?”

“He was very much altered, though I can scarcely say in what particular. He looked a great deal older, he had lost some of his white teeth, and his hair was not at all of the same colour as when we first knew him; it was not black at all, nor was it so very curly. And yet his eyes, black and bright and twinkling, would have betrayed him directly—that is, to any one who had ever known him at all intimately. I remember now—though I thought little of it at the time—none of us could ever persuade him to have his likeness taken.”

“Was he alone?”

“No, he was not. A lady was on his arm, and yet—not exactly a lady. I fancied I had seen her before; but probably it was only a chance likeness.”

“It was not Susanna South?”

“Most certainly not—she was very different looking; decidedly taller, but not so trim in figure. Strangely enough, the first glance reminded me of your sister Annie; there was a likeness, and yet the two were quite different. Stanger's companion looked very unhappy, and sadly out of health; there was a consumptive look about her, though I should say her cheeks were painted; and she was very gaily dressed.”

“Can you remember what she wore?”

“No; I cannot recall any special detail of her *toilette*; I could only perceive that her dress, though handsome, was not at all in good taste. But I did notice one thing—she had a *mark* on the chin, as if she had received some kind of injury; as if she had been violently struck or burnt, many years ago.’

"Was it a broad scar, going directly across the chin, and terminating in a peculiar dent, as if the lower jaw had been almost shattered?"

"You describe it exactly, as far as I can remember. I thought, as I looked at the chin, that its owner had just escaped being a pretty woman. Yes, she certainly resembled Annie, though it is by no means a compliment to your sister to say so; but you know there are all sorts of likenesses, and some are what we call 'plain likenesses.' Now, I had a schoolfellow who was undoubtedly a *handsome* likeness of myself, and yet we were not at all related. But this person with Stanger struck me as being a good deal like some one I knew, and when I came to think over it, it was Annie Derrington whom she so much resembled; and yet there was a very great difference. You look vexed, Dolly. Surely you do not fancy I mean any disrespect to Annie because the features and general outline of this person's face—this person, who was *not* a lady—reminded me strongly of her?"

"Of course, I am not so foolish; I was not even thinking of Annie. I only thought the scar on the chin was slightly familiar, and I wondered whether a person I once encountered so disfigured might not be the companion of the man we still call 'Count Stanger.' Was there a large, peculiar-looking *mole*, about half-way down, below the under-lip?"

"There was a discolourment, certainly; but I had not time enough to notice whether it was a *mole*, though I should say it was something of that sort. I am glad you came this afternoon, Dolly, for I do think Mr. Osborne, or one of his sons, ought to know that the criminal really is in England, and, probably, not far off either, for I have not the slightest doubt in my own mind that I really encountered the fugitive on the river-bank. He and the female with him were pacing slowly backwards and forwards, and were evidently deep in conversation. And, by the way, he spoke as we passed each other, and it was *his* voice; that voice I have never forgotten, and never shall forget."

"If it was really Stanger, would he not have recognised you?"

"He may have done so, of course, but I scarcely think he did; and he was so much occupied with his lady companion

that he hardly looked at me at all. And all my friends think I have altered so much since I was at Buxton, and especially since I married. I am so much stouter, and so matronly looking. Several people who knew me only slightly as Florence L'Estrange have failed to recognise me as Mrs. Charles Paterson."

"Yes; you are certainly a good deal altered; you were a slight, fragile-looking girl three years ago, and you have grown into a fine, well-developed woman. You wear your hair, too, in such a different style, and I think it has grown a good deal darker."

"Do not put by your work, Dolly; we quite expected you to stay to dinner. Charles will be at home in about a quarter of an hour—he will be disappointed, Dolly, if you do not remain."

"Thank you, Flo. dear; but I promised to be at home in time for dinner this evening, and if I set off at once I shall just manage it. Philip is expecting some friends, I know, and mother will be rather disappointed if I am absent."

"Queenie will entertain Philip's friends, I am sure; you will not be greatly needed. You may as well take compassion on our dulness, Dolly; and you will hear, too, what Charlie has to say about Stanger."

But Dolly was not to be persuaded, and she really wanted not so much to be at home as to find herself alone in her own room. Of course she would speak to Philip at the first opportunity; he must know, and that speedily, of Stanger's reappearance in England. But her feverish anxiety was on another account, at which Mrs. Paterson had been quite unable to guess. About twelve years ago—not very long after Kitty's marriage—she had met with a singular misfortune. She had fallen, as it was said, on the ice; severely injured the lower jaw, knocked out a couple of under-teeth, and altogether smashed and hopelessly disfigured her chin. For several months she remained shut up in the house, and saw no one. Indeed, she had suffered considerably, and had to place herself under strict surgical care,

It was a long time before she was really presentable

again ; but towards the close of about a year she began to get over the worst effects of the disaster. Her jaw, as her husband said, was successfully *mended* ; her chin was so well "patched up" that it looked "*nearly* as well as ever" ; and a very good dentist replaced the lost teeth with two artificial ones that would never be known as "false."

The scar where the cut had healed still remained, however, and would always remain while life lasted ; but, as time went on, the disfigurement became less and less visible, till in process of time Mrs. Chapman, though always careful of her personal appearance, ceased to concern herself very much about it. The mark on the chin was there, and *ugly* to some extent it must always be ; but it was of little account, after all, and the skilful doctor, in whose hands she had remained so long, assured her that if she lived to be fifty it would scarcely be noticeable ! But the last time Mrs. Derrington and Kitty had met, the former had been much struck with her altered appearance ; her cheeks were hollow and hectic, her temples sunk, her features strangely attenuated, and her whole look was that of a person on whom consumption has laid its relentless hand.

Dolly had heard this from her step-mother some weeks before, and Mrs. Derrington remarked, "I am very much afraid, Dolly, she is really very ill ; she has a terrible cough, and she is almost wasted away. You know that *mole* she had on the chin, that in the old time she used to call her 'beauty-mark' ; it has become so strangely discoloured ! I always think her accident had something to do with it, and perhaps now the state of her health has affected it ; but it certainly has become very conspicuous of late. No ; I do not fancy she cares about seeing you, Dolly, and I had much rather you did not visit her, unless you can do her some good. I feel that both you and Annie are better away from Mrs. Chapman. There is a growing mystery in poor Kitty's life ; people—and not common chatter-pies either—say such uncomfortable things about her, and young girls like you and Annie are so readily compromised."

And now Dolly was much exercised in her mind respect-

ing this sudden apparition of Kitty and "the Count" upon the Chelsea Embankment. That it was Stanger she was tolerably sure; and she had no doubt whatever that his companion was her own eldest sister, Kitty Chapman, who had never been supposed to be on intimate terms with the escaped criminal—either before or after the jewel robbery.

She had made one little discovery, however, that seemed to imply an undesirable connection between Kitty and "Susanna South"; but as it was not actual *proof*, and she might quite possibly have made a mistake, she had kept her own secret, and never breathed to any one a word of the surprise that had almost stunned her more than two years ago.

Now, however, something *must* be said; but whether Mrs. Chapman's name should be at all mentioned in the revelation that could no longer be withheld, Dolly Derrington was entirely undecided. She was so painfully perplexed, that when she did reach home, and felt that she could, without the slightest untruth, plead indisposition as an excuse for her non-appearance at the dinner-table, she resolved to stay upstairs, and refresh herself with some soup only—her neuralgia being from time to time almost more than she could endure patiently.



CHAPTER XXIX.

THE OLD SCHOOL-ROOM.

"WHAT must I do? What *ought* I to do?" questioned Dolly Derrington of herself, when, having disposed of the not unwelcome plate of soup, she pushed aside the tray on which it had been served, and proceeded to think seriously on the steps that should be taken. It was not easy to decide upon the next movement

that must result from Mrs. Paterson's unexpected disclosure ; but, after some deliberation, she came to the conclusion that she would at once, and at the earliest opportunity, tell Philip all that had occurred—so far, at least, as Stanger was concerned ; but maintain, for the present, a strict reserve on the subject of his companion.

“For, after all,” quoth Dolly, as she paced to and fro in the deepening twilight, “I do not really know. I cannot be absolutely certain that it was Kitty whom Florence noticed with the ‘Count’ on the Chelsea Embankment. I have not much doubt of it, though ; for the scar on the chin and the resemblance to Annie are almost conclusive testimony. Still, I do think I may give Kitty the benefit of such poor uncertainty as there may be ; and, of course, it is quite possible, though not very likely, that there are two women living in the world who have sustained a similar injury, though not having, I am afraid, that peculiar blemish—or ‘beauty spot’—in conjunction with the disfigurement. I will look at that paper I found in Susanna’s room again. I have told myself a thousand times that it is an absurd mistake.”

Now, the “mistake,” or coincidence, or whatever might be the discovery, was by this time a thing of the past ; more than two years had elapsed since the event alluded to. The facts were simply these : One evening, early in the spring following the jewel robbery, and a short time before the journey to Paris was undertaken, Dolly had gone into the room, once occupied by Susanna South, and, without the slightest idea of making any kind of search, had looked around her, and had at last taken down a smart winter dress that was hanging on a hook behind the door.

Of course, the apartment had undergone the closest examination ; every drawer had been emptied, and even the carpet and bed-curtains had been removed, under supervision of the police. Very little of Susanna’s own property had remained behind her—most of her belongings—which were, at the best, but few in number and of trifling value—having been removed previously to her own flight.

Nothing was left affording the smallest clue to the robbery, or to the absolute identity of the woman herself. Several articles of shabby clothing were in the nearly emptied drawers; an old cloak, scarcely worth giving to a beggar, was in the wardrobe cupboard, and on the door hung the violet cashmere dress, which for some reason or other attracted Dolly's attention. Of course the pockets of both dress and cloak had been searched, but without result. Susanna had left no tell-tale evidence behind her.

So, at least, it seemed to the official investigators; it was reserved for Dolly to make the only discovery that the room afforded. She took the dress from the brass hook on which it hung, without exactly knowing why, except that she felt rather curious as to the arrangement of a good deal of cotton velvet draped about the bottom of the skirt. It was rather cleverly managed, she decided, after examining the imitation folds and the general effect of the whole. Then she tried, woman-like, to see for herself how the foundation of the effective trimming had been contrived; for Dolly was not above taking a hint, and it suddenly occurred to her that a less elaborate arrangement of a little better material would exactly suit a dress that Mrs. Derrington had consulted her about altering.

"There is a good deal of stiffening, however," was Dolly's conclusion, when she thought she quite understood how the clever thing was done. "I could show Mrs. Derrington a very much simpler way in which her old winsey could be made quite wearable again, and with about half the velvet, and with far less pains. All this false drapery would be far too heavy for her, and too cumbrous. But surely this is not the usual lining; it is not muslin at all; it is paper!"

And then, after a little careful manipulation, Dolly found out that quite at the bottom of the hem was a sheet of paper, doubled more than once, and that it had evidently slipped from the pocket, which was defective, into the lining, and so down to the extreme edge of the skirt. Naturally enough, she opened the document, for such it appeared to be; the creased, worn, and decidedly dirty paper *might* possibly reveal something of the whereabouts

of the missing jewels!—it might even give Susanna's real name!

It was cold in the deserted room, which had scarcely been entered since the police had ended their scrutiny, and Dolly thought it would be wiser to carry her treasure trove to her comfortable room, that she might examine it at her leisure at her own fireside.

What was her surprise to find, when the paper was properly straightened, that she was reading nothing more or less than the "character" of Susanna, as purported to be furnished by Mrs. Barrington. That "character," as we know, had already been perused by Dolly, and commented upon in not too complimentary a fashion; and since its earliest arrival, it had been read over and over again, both by Mrs. Osborne and Mrs. Fairfax, and all had agreed that Miss South's flattering testimonials were simply *forged!* though by whom, or through what agency, it was impossible to divine. And now Dolly found herself reading the same words—the veritable letter, as far as matter and diction were concerned, though slightly altered, and here and there, as it would seem, carefully corrected.

But the writing was by no means the same; the "character" which had been retained by Susanna, and that which had been received by Miss Osborne, were two separate and distinct compositions; and, strange to say, the caligraphy of the one which Dolores now held in her trembling hands was not at all unfamiliar. Who wrote the letter that poor, infatuated Queenie had considered so "very satisfactory," no one, perhaps, would ever know; but Dolly's beating heart misgave her, that *she* knew, only too well, who had written and indited every line of the somewhat irregular, but decidedly characteristic, epistle now before her. Kitty Chapman had undoubtedly—or so her sister felt convinced—furnished the original of the fictitious document, supposed to emanate from Mrs. Barrington, of Brook Street; Dolly could almost have sworn to her very peculiar y's and w's, and her capital S's; also there was some very remarkable and distinctive punctuation, and, as if still further to confirm her suspicion, the curious orthography which had always been Kitty's weakness, and the

precise disregard for Lindley Murray and his compeers, which had been Kitty's stumbling-block from her childhood upwards.

Yet, as this unpleasant discovery only proved the fact of Susanna's treachery and fraud as to testimonials, and as Dolly had no absolute proof that the rough copy had been furnished by her sister, she resolved to hold her peace, and give no sign till such time as duty or expediency should bid her speak. And then, not many weeks afterwards, she and Queenie had commenced their pupilage under Madame Pierrot, and the original of the testimonials had remained behind, under safe lock and key, in an old-fashioned *escritoire*, which James Osborne had once given her for school-room purposes. And as time had passed on, and other anxieties and perplexities occupied Dolly's mind, she almost ceased to revert to the uncomfortable suspicions that had presented themselves on her discovery of the rough copy of the Barrington testimonials.

But now her old fears were suddenly re-awakened ; it must have been Kitty who was Stanger's companion by the river-side ; and, if so, what was the bond that held them altogether, the false Count, the false waiting-maid—and Chapman ?

"I will look through that document again," said Dolly, standing up, and going to the very substantial old desk in which she had deposited Kitty's supposed original copy of Mrs. Barrington's furnished "character." The desk had stood in her own room for some years now ; it had remained there during her long absence on the Continent, and it contained, besides the obnoxious letter, a very few sheets of paper, that their owner desired to keep strictly private, as well as the coral set and the gold ornaments which had been given her on her seventeenth birthday.

At the bottom of all—and securely sealed in an envelope, on which she had written her own name before leaving home, two years since—she found, quite undisturbed, the creased, soiled paper she had taken from the bottom of Susanna's dress. There was light enough still to read it carefully over, and she went to the window, and once more went through every word, and line, and sentence. And

then she covered her face with her hands, and reflected silently and very sadly on the conclusion to which she had reluctantly arrived. When she looked up again, the sunset light had faded away, the sweeping branches of the great cedar lay darkly on the smooth green lawn, and she could scarcely distinguish the early roses from the flowering creepers that hung about her window.

"I cannot doubt it, I cannot," she said, mournfully, as she restored the scrawly, badly-spelt, but yet most ingeniously-worded epistle to its safe hiding-place at the bottom of the brass-bound old *escritoire*. "I am more certain than ever that my sister Kitty wrote that false character, which was to secure to Susanna South her situation as lady's maid in this family. I think I cannot be mistaken; though I am no expert, I fancy I know one handwriting from another, just as I always intuitively notice about it any distinctive characteristic. But, oh! what had Kitty to do with a woman wicked and unprincipled as Susanna South and—worse still—with the burglar Stanger? for no one can doubt for a moment that South and Stanger were vile accomplices; and if it were so, what, then, was Kitty Chapman, my own eldest sister?"

She had scarcely locked the desk when some one tapped gently at the door. It was Mrs. Osborne, who came to see for herself how far Dolly was actually indisposed; for dinner was over, and the gentlemen and Queenie were in the garden, pacing backwards and forwards on the broad gravel walk beyond the lawn.

"You are not really ill, dear?" said Chrissie, anxiously, for, as far as she could discern in the uncertain light that fell on Dolly's face, the girl was looking pale and over-worn.

"No, mother, dear, I am not ill," replied Dolly, speaking as cheerfully as she could. "I was tired, and my head had that troublesome feeling again—heavy and aching, you know; and every now and then there was undoubtedly a touch of pure neuralgia; and I am best quite quiet. The pain passes away generally if I sit very still, and do not force myself to eat."

"But you ought to have eaten something; the soup, though very good and nice, was not sufficient. I wish I

had sent you a slice of chicken and a glass of that old wine Dr. Graham recommended ; and it is not too late to repair the omission."

"I think I would rather not have the chicken, thank you."

"The chicken would be neither hot nor cold, even if any is left ; but there is sure to be something ready cooked and delicate in the larder. Besides, there is the wine in the cellarette ; Philip brought some up for you only a few days ago."

"I should very much prefer a cup of tea, if I may have it alone," was Dolly's reply ; "nothing picks me up like a nice cup of good tea after one of these attacks. I would rather not come into the drawing-room, please, as there are visitors."

"The visitors are only young Denham, who had promised father a subscription for the Sunday-school excursion, and we persuaded him to stay and dine and spend the evening, and Frank Howard, who always comes if he is asked, and seems quite attached to Philip, as, indeed, he is to all my boys."

"Everybody likes Mr. Frank Howard, too, I fancy. I am sorry to miss him, for I enjoy his company in my quiet way ; but I do think it is wisest not to come down again to-night. Would you mind sending up a cup of tea and a little thin bread-and-butter into the schoolroom ? It will be good to change the air before I really go to bed, and I dare say the gas is lighted ; Queenie and I are so often there after dinner."

"If you do not feel quite equal to talking, that would be the better plan. Go into the schoolroom, dear ; Nurse, you know, wants to re-christen it 'the young ladies' *boudoir*.' I will send you a nice little tea, with something more substantial than thin bread-and-butter ; and I will look in on you again, either here or there, before I go to bed."

And Mrs. Osborne departed, resolved that a dainty supper-tray should be at Dolly's disposal ; and presently Dolly herself adjourned to the old schoolroom, which had been prettily fitted up for the use and comfort of the two girls, who very much appreciated having a snug parlour of

their own, where they could read, draw, practise, or study without disturbing or being disturbed.

In a few minutes the promised refreshment appeared. There was "mother's" own little bedroom tray, with its dainty service of china and silver ; plenty of delicate bread-and-butter ; potted meats ; and a good supply of ham and tongue sandwiches, as well as a pot of special preserved strawberries, which cook always referred to as "dear Miss Dolly's special little weakness."

Miss Derrington enjoyed her warm, strong tea, and after she had taken a cup, and tried the delicious bread-and-butter and a seductive tongue sandwich, she began to feel very much better and brighter, and almost regretted that she had elected to spend *all* the evening in solitude. She was not inclined for bed just yet ; she felt much less tired and dispirited than she had been an hour ago. Besides, was there not the whole long night before her ? And Dolly had not been of late quite as good a sleeper as she had been before she went to Paris. She had nearly finished her tea, and was thinking what volume she should take from the well-furnished shelves about her, when Philip entered the room.

"I came to look for you, Dolly," said the young man. "They said at dinner-time you had a headache, or something, and wanted only a plate of soup ; and a little while ago I heard mother giving her orders about a tray to be carried up to the 'schoolroom' for your especial benefit. Why, it is quite a 'tea-supper,' it seems to me ; I hope you are able to enjoy it."

"I am enjoying it very much, thank you. I had no idea that I was in the least hungry till I had about half demolished that charming little pile of tongue sandwiches. Could you not manage a cup of tea yourself, Philip ? The tea-pot is by no means exhausted, and what remains is excellent ; do let me pour you out a cup ?"

"With pleasure ! I never care for tea when it is formally handed round, and I feel rather solitary to-night ; Johnnie Denham is gone home, and, of course, Frank has neither eyes nor ears for anybody except Queenie ; mother is reading a new novel, and the governor has fallen into a doze

over last night's debates in the House. I think Howard is pretty well done for ! Do you think there is the remotest chance of our Lady Regina being moved to say—*yes ?* ”

“ I had no idea till within a little time that there was the slightest question of Queenie being requested to say anything of the sort. I always fancied she regarded Frank Howard as a confirmed old bachelor, who had never proposed, or dreamed of proposing, to any living woman. And I know she thinks him, what she does not hesitate to call—‘ *awfully plain.* ’ ”

“ And so he is *plain*—very plain ; exceptionally so ! When he is an old man he will look something like a chimpanzee. And yet he has a kind expression. Howard is a thorough good fellow, and I wish with all my heart that he may be fated to become my brother-in-law. And John and James wish it heartily, too, I know. As for Herbert, he is perfectly enthusiastic about Frank ; we are all tremendously fond of him. Queenie's brothers, one and all, would at once give their unqualified consent, and congratulate themselves.”

“ I think Mr. Howard would prove a most excellent husband, but he is certainly a good deal Queenie's senior.”

“ Only about twelve years—thirteen at the outside. And, Dolly, I hold that the husband should, without doubt, be a few years older than the wife ; a girl who elects to marry a young fellow—of her own age, say—grows elderly, while he is yet in his prime. As a rule, women do not wear so well as men.”

“ Women have a great deal of home-anxiety ; they have household cares, and nursery cares, and all the rest of it.”

“ Perhaps so ; but men have business worries.”

“ I suppose all mankind, as well as womankind, have their crumpled rose-leaf, not to say their inevitable ‘ crook in the lot.’ Queenie thinks she has experienced a goodly share of this world's troubles already.”

“ And so she has, Dolly. But she has only herself to thank for all, or nearly all, her ‘ trials and sorrows,’ as she pathetically insists on terming her self-inflicted woes. I am sure I wish she would accept Frank Howard, out of hand,

for he would be good to her, and take all care of her, and he would 'put up' with her innumerable whims and caprices, more than most, I feel assured. She does not love him now, I grant, but I cannot help hoping that she will be brought to regard him with complacency; she has learned to *like* him, in spite of his ugliness, I am pretty certain; she rather pities him for his want of good looks, and pity is sometimes not very far akin to a warmer sentiment. At any rate, I should be glad to see my beautiful sister happily disposed of, and in the safe keeping of a good, sensible, respectable husband, such as we *know* Frank Howard to be. And I have my hopes that Frank—he is wonderfully persistent in his quiet way, you know—will persevere, till he has won Queenie's heart, if she has one; and if not, her free consent."

"She is a good deal altered of late, Philip; she is not nearly so wilful and imperious as she was, even six weeks ago. But, if you have finished your tea, I have something I particularly wish to say to you, while we are quite alone. I think you are the best and fittest person in whom to confide."

"Indeed? you make me curious, dear Dolly. But whatever is your difficulty, you may absolutely rely on me for assistance, or, if you seek it, for counsel such as I may presume to offer."

"It is not exactly a case of assistance, and you must take counsel with yourself for yourself, and you will probably choose to consult with James and John, and perhaps with your other brothers. Philip, what will you say when I tell you I have news of Stanger?"

"You do not mean it? Have you seen the villain, or have you only heard of him?"

"I have only heard of him; I have not encountered him, I am thankful to say."

"But what is the news concerning him? He is not in England, is he?"

"He was in England a week ago, and in London, too. At least, he was no farther off than Chelsea, and he was met there by one who knew him well, and almost as intimately as our poor Queenie!"

"By whom? By any one on whose testimony we may rely? People make such wild mistakes."

"I think this is no mistake; my informant was Mrs. Paterson—Florence L'Estrange, you know; with whom we were all so intimate at the time of the robbery. I took tea with her this afternoon, and she told me something that happened to her last Thursday or Friday. She was walking by the riverside—at Cheyne Walk, in fact—when she met Stanger 'face to face,' as she puts it, walking slowly and conversing with a female companion. She knew him, but he failed to recognise her; he scarcely seems to have noticed her."

"That is not very surprising, as Florence is a good deal altered—a good deal improved, I should say! But is Mrs. Charles Paterson *quite* certain that she was not deceived?"

"Quite certain; she saw much of him, at one time, you know. And she met him *twice*; for she returned upon her steps, and the Count and his lady companion turned too; at any rate, Florence encountered them a second time. But I think you had better listen to the story from her own lips; I am not exactly sure how the second meeting fell out, but I think both Flo' and Stanger retraced their way. At any rate, Flo' returned to the Surrey side by the Albert Bridge."

"And you heard this not many hours ago?"

"Only this afternoon; Mr. Paterson has been from home for a little while. If I had not paid my visit to-day, Florence, who told her husband all about the meeting, would have tried to see *you* to-morrow in the City. She thought your mother had better not be agitated; she wanted simply to let you know what had occurred, so that you might take steps immediately if you thought proper, and please yourself about communicating with the father."

"I will drop Mrs. Paterson a line before I go to bed, and arrange to see her to-morrow evening at her own house. I shall say nothing to my father till I have first spoken to James and John. You did not give mother a hint, I am pretty sure?"

"Certainly I did not. I said no word that might betray

the secret *to her*. I waited till I could speak quietly to you. It is for you, now, to determine what shall be done ; the responsibility is off my shoulders. I think I have told the whole story correctly, and as it was told to me ; but I am quite sure you ought to hear the narration at first hand. One conveys erroneous impressions sometimes, however accurately one strives to tell the tale, and I must confess that I felt a little stupid this afternoon ; I think going back upon those terrible days rather unnerved me, for my head ached horribly when I returned home, and I am sure it was best, on all accounts, that I did not make my appearance at dinner."

"You are better now ; are you not ?"

"Far better. It was really a little neuralgic turn. If anything upsets me I always feel it in my head. But my tea revived me ; I knew it would do me more good than wine ; and now that I have had this little talk with you, I shall be all right again."

"I hope so ! Don't trouble yourself in the least about that scamp, Dolly, my dear ; leave the whole affair in my hands. From this moment the responsibility is mine. I will lose no time in interviewing Madame Florrie, and perhaps I shall confer with her husband ; he seems to me a man with plenty of sound sense, and no small discretion. Then, when I am in possession of the entire evidence, I shall consult with James and John. In the meantime, keep your own counsel, dear. Father need not be worried till we have settled how to proceed ; and, as to dear mother, the less she knows about the affair the better ; she cannot help us, and she will only be disturbed ; I know she fancies, even yet, that I am not safe from that scoundrel's bullets. She has never quite recovered from the shock of the firing, and my reappearance, with my hair a little singed, and my face all black with powder !"

"No ; mother shall know nothing that she need not know. She has not even mentioned the name of Stanger, in my hearing, since our return from Paris ; and you may be pretty sure Queenie makes no allusion to the *pseudo* Count. Now I have said all I wanted to say, and I shall go to bed with a peaceful mind. I am so much obliged to

you for coming up here, Philip ; I was just puzzling myself, when you entered the room, how to send a message to you, requesting a private interview. I was thinking of a note, but I did not want Queenie to have a suspicion of what was in the wind, and Queenie is not lacking in the sixth sense, or in the seventh, either ! She has a quick perception, and, in some cases, actual intuition."

"She has, 'in some cases,' as you observe. I always say Queenie has not the gift that you have, of a proper estimation of character. Her vanity can always be worked upon. Well, I hope she really is changed ; but I should not like to know that she was again exposed to the insidious flattery that is always so dangerous to a weak character."

"Say, rather, to a character that has its weak side ; for, as a whole, Queenie is not at all weak-minded. She is too accessible to flattery, I confess ;—or, perhaps, I should say she *was*. On some points she is still unduly susceptible, I think ; but I do believe the best thing for her would be an earnest attachment to a worthy and honourable man—a man of whom she could be proud—and of whom her friends must thoroughly approve."

"If she really would fall over head and ears *in love* it would be good for her. But I am always so much afraid of her partiality for handsome, captivating men—men who captivate the imagination and the senses, rather than the affections, I mean. Till Queenie is well married and comfortably settled, I shall always live in dread of her falling a prey to some designing, unprincipled adventurer, who is perhaps really dazzled by her beauty, but has also an admiration for her *golden* charms ! She is reported to be a great heiress ; and she has a face fair enough ! I do wish the report of her inheritance had not been so widely circulated."

"So father wishes. He often deploras that unlucky ball, which, he says, was owing to his weakness, and was the source of all the disasters that ensued. But for that birthday entertainment 'Aunt Jemima' would have made no public announcement ; 'Count Stanger' would never have learned all the ways of the house ; and perhaps the sapphires and the pearls might still be safe in their lawful owner's

possession. You see, half the world—that is, half the London world—got to hear exaggerated reports of the jewels, and of the startling apparition of Mrs. Marmaduke Merridew, with her imposing retinue. No wonder that Queenie's heiress-ship has been extravagantly exaggerated; no wonder that she poses as a second Helen of Troy and the goddaughter of an Oriental princess."

"I am thankful, however, that there never was any god-mother in the question. If I believed at all in sponsors—which, of course, I don't—and I had a child of my own, I would secure for its 'godparents' good, honest, respectable people, whose prayers would be a blessing to the little one, rather than the curse which filthy lucre may entail."

"Money need not entail a *curse*. Queenie may yet make good use of the wealth with which it has pleased God to endow her. A rich woman may be as happy as a poor one. Riches honestly gotten, as hers are, may be productive of countless blessings."

"They are sure to involve countless responsibilities. *I* will never marry a rich woman, Dolly. When I marry I shall look for a fortune *in* my wife, not *with* her; unless, indeed——"

And then Philip abruptly stopped, for it suddenly occurred to him that he should by no means object to a modestly-dowered bride. Doubtless Dolly herself would have a respectable marriage portion, and Dolly would be a treasure worth any man's possession. He was just leaving the room when he stopped and said: "I suppose Mrs. Paterson did not tell you who was Stanger's companion?"

"She could not, for she did not know her."

"It was not Susanna, then, for she would certainly have been recognised."

"It was not Susanna, but some one of entirely different appearance. Madame Stanger—if that be her proper style and title—may not be in England, or, of course, she may. Florence has nothing to reveal beyond the fact that she really met the long-missing criminal, on a certain day, and on the Chelsea Embankment."

"And a very important fact it is, too. Perhaps I might manage to interview Mrs. Paterson to-morrow morning;

then I should have the day before me, and I could, if it seemed expedient, lose no time in resuming my acquaintance with our friends in Scotland Yard."

Dolly bade Philip "Good-night," and went away to her own room somewhat relieved in mind, but, on the whole, very far from satisfied. She felt sick at heart, indeed, as it came back to her remembrance, as soon as she was alone again, that *she* had a very shrewd suspicion as to the identity of Stanger's associate, and that she had only communicated just as much of the "important fact" as was her bounden duty. The longer she meditated the greater was her perplexity. What was she to do? What *ought* she to do? How far must Kitty's disreputable secret be kept? For the whole question of the false character was suddenly reopened, and the unhappy business itself, from first to last, had—or so it seemed to her—assumed quite another aspect.

"I wish I knew what I ought to do," sighed Dolly, sadly, as she listened to the far-away reverberations of "Big Ben" slowly tolling out the hour of midnight. "I cannot accuse Kitty on what will appear to be simple suspicion, and I really have nothing to go upon beyond the miserable conviction that the handwriting *is* my eldest sister's."

But if Kitty were really in collusion with Susanna South, who was, past all doubt, the accomplice of Stanger, and, perhaps, of the whole gang of thieves, in what light, then, might Mrs. Chapman be viewed? She had certainly played into the hands of the robbers themselves; was she not, to say the least of it, *accessory* to the guilt of the criminals? Would not justice hold her as implicated in their crime? Would she not share their open shame?

At last Dolly decided that she must seek the counsel of some wiser and more experienced person than herself. She dared not run the risk of making a blunder that might be fatal to *somebody*! Equally she dreaded doing anything that must be inimical to the Osbornes, in whose interests her heart, as well as her conscience, was bound up, or injuring past remedy her sister, her own father and mother's own child.

"I will go and confer with Mrs. Derrington at once," was

her final determination. "I can trust Mother Derrington if I can trust any one in the wide world. I will confide everything to her ; I will place the matter in her hands, and I will do her bidding. For she has so much wisdom, such calm, dispassionate judgment, and such sterling principle, that I shall not hesitate to accept her *ultimatum*. She is too sagacious to misunderstand the dangers that may threaten ; and far too good, too God-fearing, to sanction what may involve any wrong-doing. If duty bid her speak, she will speak, regardless of consequences. If her conscience tell her she may be silent, she will be silent, and will hold my communication sacred. She is a woman of honour as of principle ; she is kind and merciful as just and true. Yes ; I will be guided entirely by Mrs. Derrington."

And then poor Dolly, weary, and worn, and sad, laid her aching head on her pillow, and slept profoundly till the morning, when events proved highly propitious to the intention she had formed. She accepted as a good omen Mrs. Osborne's first words.

"Dolly," said Chrissie, after salutations had been exchanged, "should you be equal to a little walk this morning? I really fancy the air would be rather good for you than otherwise, if you do not get over-fatigued. I want you to see your step-mother for me ; I have just had a letter of some consequence respecting that unfortunate family, whom we are thinking of persuading to emigrate. She can answer inquiries that I cannot ; she can, and will, I know, settle two or three questions before we can take any further step. You can take your time in walking to Vine Cottage, and the morning is not at all hot ; you can rest, and take early dinner with your step-mother, if you choose, instead of returning home to luncheon. Can you manage it, Dolly ? "

Of course Dolly was only too thankful to take advantage of the opportunity so auspiciously presented. It was a beautiful morning ; the sky was clear, and the air soft, with a delicious coolness that made walking exercise agreeable. Dolly lost no time in setting forth ; the light, balmy breezes invigorated her, and somewhat restored her cheerfulness, as she took her way across the Common, and along the

quiet familiar roads to Brixton Hill. By twelve o'clock she was at Vine Cottage, and Mrs. Derrington was at home, and quite at leisure to listen to all she had to tell her.



CHAPTER XXX.

KITTY'S CONFESSION.

"FIRST of all, I will complete the business on which I was sent!" thought Dolly, as she sat down in the family sitting-room, and drew from her pocket the letter which Mrs. Osborne had received by the early post that morning. It was not till she had gained all necessary information, and qualified herself to give such explanation as was required, that she produced the other letter, which had been hidden in the *escritoire* so long.

"Mother," she began, with just a little falter in her voice, "I have something to show you which is a source of considerable solicitude to me. I wish earnestly for your opinion—your advice! Read this letter; the matter of it is familiar to you. Who should you say wrote this rough copy?—for it is a '*rough copy*,' you perceive. It contains erasures and amendments which do not appear as such in another document we have all perused; and there is also bad spelling and slipshod English which have not been reproduced in the neatly written epistle that is still, I believe, in Mother Osborne's private desk."

"Where did you get it, child? It is, as you say, a rough copy of the flattering testimonial, supposed to be furnished by that Mrs. Barrington, who may, or may not be, altogether an imaginary person. This is the original, I should suppose, of Susanna South's *character*, fairly copied out by a supposititious mistress."

"That is just what I take it to be; but to whom should *you* ascribe this '*original*'?"

"I am afraid, Dolly—I am sadly afraid, this is your sister Kitty's handiwork! Indeed, I have little, if any, doubt of it. But how did you come by what was clearly never intended for your sight, or for the sight of anybody, save the impostor Susanna and the conspirator whom we have called Mrs. Barrington?"

Then ensued the explanation of the discovery of the mysterious epistle; also the story of Mrs. Paterson's encounter on the Chelsea Embankment; and the reasons that Dolly had for being only too sure that Stanger's female associate was no other than Mrs. Chapman. "For you know," said Dolly, when the miserable tale was ended, "we never guessed that Kitty—*our* Kitty—had a finger in the pie! How could we? How could we, for one moment, imagine that she was on any terms with a common housebreaker? Oh, mother! mother! what does it all mean?"

"Dolly, I tremble to offer any explanation! I have had my fears for a long time; I have had my private suspicions ever since the jewels were stolen. I was always afraid, though I cannot exactly explain why, that your sister—and my step-daughter—was in collusion with that infamous Susanna South. And Susanna was undoubtedly Stanger's accomplice and his *wife*; and the evidence this letter affords terribly inculcates Kitty. But how did Mrs. Paterson recognise her? I did not know that they had ever met."

"She did not recognise her, for they *had* never met before. It was I who knew who Stanger's companion must be—for Florence Paterson so exactly described the *scar* and the *mole*, which are quite sufficient to identify Kitty, and distinguish her from all other women. More especially was I confirmed in my terrible suspicion when she remarked, innocently enough, that she had a look of my sister Annie—only the lady with the mark upon her chin was *not* a lady! No one knows but myself that these two were seen together; though, of course, the fact of Stanger's sudden re-appearance has been communicated to Philip. He is with Mrs. Paterson at this moment, I suppose; for he meant to hear all she could tell him to-day. The

information came through me, and I had no alternative, no desire, as far as Stanger was concerned, to withhold it. Philip will hear only of a 'female companion,' and he cannot recognise her from description, as he never saw her, even for a moment ; nor did he ever hear of the accident that happened to her twelve years ago. Now, the question is, am I bound to divulge the disgraceful secret? Must I betray Kitty? Does my duty call me to reveal the too probable fact of her complicity? Or, may I righteously and honourably preserve silence?"

"I don't know, child ; I must think awhile. Your secret is my secret, naturally ; and one can't help wishing to shield one's own kith and kin ; but justice must be respected. I cannot exactly see, at this moment, how the revelation of Kitty's complicity on this one point affects all the rest of the business. Certainly, Susanna had as much to do with the robbery as Stanger, and she never would have been received in all trust into the Osborne household, but for the false character which is really Mrs. Chapman's production. If Kitty's part in the matter came to the front, as it may do any day, things would go badly with her."

"How is she? You spoke, several weeks ago, of her being in an unsatisfactory state of health, and Mrs. Paterson mentioned how haggard and worn she looked, and how hectic was her colour."

"She is a great deal worse than she was some little time since. Curiously enough, I had a letter from her only last night. That is it—in my work-basket. She is evidently in very bad spirits, and she says she caught a fresh cold about a week ago, walking by the river. That account of herself exactly tallies with Mrs. Paterson's story. What should she be doing but mischief at the river-side? And she confesses to being out after sunset—a proceeding she was most strongly charged to avoid. Read, Dolly ; I do think her writing—her scrawl, rather—is worse than ever, and her grammar *and* spelling are execrable ! I was thinking, as I washed up the breakfast things, whether it was not my *duty* to go and see her ; she is my husband's daughter, when all is said and done."

"And she is my own sister ! Mother, I am sure she

is very badly ; that fatal, insidious malady is gaining ground. Perhaps I ought to visit her ; but I do not know now where she lives, and this note gives no address. I have known nothing of her 'whereabouts' since she left Forest Hill so suddenly."

"Mr. Chapman took quite an aversion to the place, she told me, when houses of an inferior description came to be built so near his residence. And 'Fred did hate to be *overlooked*,' she said, when she sent me word they were leaving Virginia House, long before their lease was up. They moved away to a place near Shepherd's Bush, and that neighbourhood was soon too much overbuilt for Mr. Chapman's taste. He has chosen a lonely spot enough now, according to Kitty ; I don't know exactly where it is ; it is somewhere in the direction of Croydon, or 'Thornton Heath ; but not precisely in either place ; and it is a good way from any town, or large village."

"Then I do not see how I can get to Kitty. I might go scouring the country for twenty miles round Croydon, and not find her. Does not father know where she is ?"

"Not in the least ; nothing has passed between us since the Chapmans left Forest Hill, and Kitty's name has scarcely been mentioned. Jennie and Maggie know nothing about them, and do not care to know ; they have both taken offence about something, I never could understand what ; Jennie says the Chapmans and the Hancoxes are far too grand for them ; it is as much as *they* can do to keep one poor little scrub servant ! Maggie's husband just says his wife and Fred's wife are not '*on terms*.' And Will is a really steady and persevering young fellow ; knows how to put his shoulder to the wheel, and values a good name. Will is the only one of my sons-in-law whom I thoroughly respect."

"And do you not know where Nelly is ?"

"I believe Nelly is not far away from South Hackney, but she is always on the move—always 'flitting,' as my mother used to call changing one's place of abode. I dare say your father could find out the Hancoxes if we really wanted them ; and they probably would know Kitty's present address. But, my child, let us take no

hasty step; I fear me, more issues are involved than we should care to contemplate. Let us 'bide a-wee,' as my first husband was so fond of saying; I fancy something will betide, before long, to show us the way we must go. Just now, all things considered, events seem in a tangled skein. We can pray over it, Dolly, and ask to be directed."

"That we *may* do. But, mother, it is a great comfort to come and have a talk to you. It is so hateful to keep something quite secret from the people you live with, and to be uncertain as to the next duty that lies before you. I cannot take counsel with Mother Osborne, you know; I *must* not. Besides, one always owes something to one's own family, and if Kitty comes to grief, we all, in some degree, share her shame and her disgrace. Perhaps that is a selfish way of looking at it, but I can never quite forget that it is so."

"It will be a dreadful trial to you if you have to speak, if Christian duty bid you betray poor Kitty. But I know you will not act till you have no alternative but to proclaim the truth. It will be hard for all of us—for Jennie, and Maggie, and Annie—and hardest for you! It will be very hard for your father, who is getting quite an old man; and hard for me, who have always striven to keep a name for honesty and uprightness."

"Then we agree to be silent on this unhappy matter? No one, save those who are guilty, know of the existence of this letter except you and I. I did think of destroying it, lest some day it should rise up and bear witness, in spite of ourselves."

"No, don't destroy it! It is sometimes God's will that a mystery should be unravelled. Keep it where you have kept it so long, and *wait*—wait to be guided. You did well in sharing your secret with your mother. It is mine, as well as yours, and we can bear the burden far better together than separately. Go home, my child, and take courage, and be sure God will show you what to do. We will both pray and deliberate; I will see you again in a few days."

Dolly went back to "The Acacias" cheered and strengthened; the sharing of the heavy burden with her

step-mother was, indeed, a comfort. Philip had a long conversation with Mrs. Paterson, but she had no more to tell than he had already listened to. Dolly had faithfully reported the story of the meeting on the Embankment, only reserving the fact of her own conviction as to the identity of Stanger's companion; Florence could but describe her as a showy, but faded-looking young woman, not by any means a lady. And the scar on the chin was particularly mentioned, and Philip made a note of this speciality; but he had never heard of the disfigurement before, and so the picture rather vividly drawn by Mrs. Charles Paterson was no revelation to him. His next step was to interview the Scotland Yard officials once more, and in a few hours the whole metropolitan police force was cognisant of the return of the renowned and long "wanted" Count Adolphe Stanger to London, and a correct description of his female companion was furnished to them. And, of course, Philip consulted his elder brothers, but to his father and mother he said no word; Queenie, too, was entirely excluded from his confidence; Dolly having told her story, evidently shrank from any repetition of the facts. She did not care, she told Philip, to assist at private conferences from which the other members of the family were excluded; and she had no more to say.

Almost a fortnight elapsed, and still nothing had transpired, albeit the police were always on the verge of making an "important discovery." One morning, however, Dolly was startled by the receipt of a letter marked "Private" from her sister, Mrs. Fred Chapman. It was years since the sisters had exchanged a line—so many years, that Dolly could not remember that Kitty had ever communicated with her by post after her marriage. They had never even spoken to each other since the mysterious episode of Miss Bella Fowkes; and very shortly after the "jewel robbery" Kitty had taken umbrage at something said by Mrs. Derrington, and abruptly ceased to visit her step-mother, who was by no means unwilling to dispense with her attentions.

The communication now received was an extremely brief one, and it was so badly written as to be almost

illegible. It only said, "Dear Dolly,—I am very ill—very ill indeed; *dying*, I feel sure. Come and see me soon, and come *alone*. I have something to tell you that no one else may know. Don't delay; I get weaker and weaker every hour."

Dolly looked at the address, for the post-mark was Camden Town; and Camden Town, as everybody knows, is a long way from Croydon, which was supposed to be the town nearest to Kitty's present residence. The address was simply 120, China Place, Tiverton Road, but a dreadfully scrawled postscript gave some directions as to the road which must be taken after leaving the railway station.

"I think I will set off at once," decided Dolly; "that is, if nobody wants me at home. I will tell Mother Osborne where I am going, of course, but there can be no occasion to tell any one else; I wonder which is the best way to get to Camden Town? I suppose I must take the North London line; I am sure I have never gone as far in that direction in my life."

Dolly found that there was nothing to prevent her taking the journey without delay, for Aunt Rachel had arrived that morning to spend a week at "The Acacias," so "mother" would be well taken care of; besides, Queenie would be at home certainly, and she had been no cipher in the household of late. A little before twelve she found herself alighting at the Camden Road Station, and at once comprehended that she must turn her steps in a northerly direction, as Kitty's habitation was somewhere about the New Town, which had grown into existence within the last few years.

So Dolores set off to look for China Place; and when she had gone about a mile along the forlorn-looking road, and perceived no sign of that for which she sought, she began to think it was time to make further inquiry. Her first application was to a postman, who said *China Place* was not on his beat, though he had heard of such a place in some road, not very far distant; but there was a policeman coming, and he would doubtless know all about it. The policeman did know something to the purpose; China Place was a good way up Tiverton Road, which had only

just been formed, and did not boast of many residences, the buildings being generally unfinished, and many of them as yet unlet. About twenty minutes' walking would bring the young lady to the point where Tiverton Road turned off from the beaten track ; " but it was not very pleasant walking anyways ! "

Thus encouraged, Dolly plodded on and on, along the weary, dusty, forlorn thoroughfare, which became shabbier and drearier the farther she went, till at last she felt sure she must have gone beyond the boundaries even of " Camden New Town," which a few years ago was certainly a very desolate, perplexing vicinity. She had almost reached the " New Prison ; " and when next she inquired at a mean-looking shop, which stood all alone by itself, on the verge of a rough piece of waste land, she was informed that she had passed Tiverton Road—which was quite half-a-mile nearer London—she would get to Lower Holloway in a few minutes ! Tiverton Road was to be known only by a rough piece of board nailed on to some wooden railings—if it hadn't fallen down, or been pulled down by mischievous lads who infested the whole district.

So Dolly retraced her steps wearily enough, till at last she found a turning which *might* be Tiverton Road, though it was really no *road* at all, only a cart-way, full of deep ruts, that told what the mud must have been earlier in the year. And the mud now was beaten into dust, and was, in places, more than ankle-deep. On either side of the ruts was a broken, uneven footpath, that must certainly have been impassable a few weeks sooner ; here and there was an unlet house or two, that seemed to have come into a rubbish-strewn field by mistake. By-and-by came rows of houses, some of them tenanted, and some of them empty ; but the let tenements were graced with lace curtains and Venetian blinds. The road began to have an air of being inhabited, and gave fair promise of leading to something better.

But where was China Place ? and was it possible that it numbered 120 residences ? Suddenly, in the midst of what appeared to be rural, neglected grounds, degenerated, for the most part, into half-wild market-gardens—diversified with hollows from which soil had been excavated, and more

than half-filled with stagnant water—appeared several good-sized houses, which had evidently stood there from the commencement of the present century, and long before “Tiverton Road” had been so much as thought of. Two of these houses were clearly empty, or seemed so to Dolly, for their windows were bare and very dirty, and the garden plots were overrun with weeds. The third had tolerably clean, though old-fashioned windows, graced with blinds and curtains, and there was a moss-grown gravel walk leading straight up to what was probably the front door; and above it was a sort of dilapidated stone tablet, on which were just discernible the words, “China Place.” How it came to be numbered 120 Dolly marvelled; but after a short consideration she determined that it must be newly included in “Tiverton Road,” and numbered with regard to the exigencies of adventurous builders, who were going to create a populous neighbourhood.

Dolores rang the bell twice before any one appeared, and then a grimy, elderly female opened the door—it was almost guiltless of paint—a very little way, and inquired who was wanted.

“Does Mrs. Chapman live here?”

“Yes, she do; but she’s very bad—very bad, indeed, and she don’t see nobody.”

“I am her sister—I know she’s ill. I came to see her by appointment. Say that Miss Dolores Derrington, of Clapham, is here.”

“Come in, then; I’ll ask if the missis ’ll see you; she said she wouldn’t see anybody.” And the visitor was shown into a little parlour just within the broad low-ceiled hall. The small room was low-ceiled also, and displayed right across it a huge, uneven beam; the antiquated, rusty grate seemed not to have known a fire for many years; the little furniture to be seen was dark with age, and must have remained undusted for weeks. A mouldy flavour pervaded the apartment, which was wainscoted, and might have been oak-painted once upon a time; the place was evidently damp and unused, and the chill atmosphere made Dolly shiver in spite of the summer temperature of the outer world. She was not at all sorry when another slatternly,

unkempt, and decidedly dirty woman came to her, and said that Mrs. Chapman was quite ready to receive Miss Derrington.

Dolly followed her snuffy-looking guide up the broad, but rather dark, stairs, which gave access to the upper regions ; then she was led across a cold, uncarpeted landing, into a spacious chamber, looking out upon a wilderness of garden-ground at the back of the house. And in this chamber, on a vast funereal canopied bedstead, propped up against pillows, but covered with a gay-coloured shawl, was Mrs. Frederick Chapman, the Kitty Derrington of old time.

"Why, you've come at once !" gasped Kitty, when she had disposed of a short, dry cough, and raised herself a little on her cushions. "How good of you ; but you always were good, Dolly. And, oh ! I am so thankful to see you, for I shall be gone from this world before many days are over ; and I have something to say—that I *must* say before I die. You haven't brought any one with you ?"

"No, I am quite alone ; and no one knew I was coming here, except Mrs. Osborne."

"That is right ! I couldn't speak out, and I could not show you what I have to show you if anybody besides ourselves was present. I am afraid it wasn't very easy to find this place ?"

"Not at all easy ; I had no idea Camden Town covered so much ground."

"Camden Town proper doesn't ! This is Camden New Town, or will be some day, when it's finished building. Except these three houses, that used to be the loneliest of lone situations a few years back, all this part was miry lanes and solitary fields. Are you tired ?"

"Yes, very ; it is a long way from Clapham, and I seem to have been walking for hours since I left the railway-station ; but it is not more than two o'clock now."

"You shall have something to eat and drink directly. What will you take ?"

"If I might have a cup of coffee I should be glad."

"Coffee ! such cat-lap ! You shall have something a world better than coffee. I've got some real good wine

near at hand ; perhaps you would like champagne best, or, if you are very tired, I should say some strong cognac, with a dash of soda-water, would do you most good."

"Thank you ; I should so much prefer the coffee, if I may have it. But don't exert yourself, Kitty, you haven't breath to speak much. Shall I ring the bell ?"

"Yes. Nurse will bring whatever you choose to order ; I must not waste my breath—only I'll have some wine, to fetch me up to the mark, you know."

"Is wine good for you ?"

"In one way, I dare say it is not ; but it will give me the strength and the spirit to tell you what I *must*. And it's no matter what I take now, nothing does me real good—*nor* harm !"

The slovenly old woman designated as "nurse" soon appeared, and Kitty was duly served with her medicine and a glass of wine. Dolly's coffee and some cake were a little delayed, but both were excellent when they came, and with renewed vigour, on either side, the conversation was resumed.

"Now you musn't mind if I talk very slowly, and make some lengthy pauses now and then ; and I shall be obliged to speak under my breath a good deal ; for if I don't keep myself very quiet I shall get a fit of coughing, and that all but does for me, and puts an end to everything. I am sure you won't excite me more than you can help, Dolly."

"I shall not excite you at all ; I will just listen quietly to all you have to say."

"I don't know about that. Prepare to be surprised—more than surprised—startled ! shocked ! horrified !"

"Perhaps I shall be a little less startled than you suppose. I found out something, Kitty, long ago."

"*Long ago ?* What was it ?"

"I found out—at least, I am tolerably certain I did—that it was through *you* the woman we called Susanna South gained admission into the family at 'The Acacias.' Her testimonials were false ; there was no such person as Mrs. Barrington. The excellent 'character' which she was supposed to furnish came originally from you !"

"How did you know that ?"

"I found the original letter—your own rough copy—which, of course, some one copied in plausible form; perhaps it was Susanna herself. She was a fairly educated woman."

"And what did you think of me?"

"My thoughts of you were very sad ones, Kitty. At first I did not fully understand; but now I think I comprehend all about it. Stanger and you have been always on intimate terms. When I say 'always,' I mean for a good while—for several years, certainly. But so far I have kept your secret."

"Bless you for that, child. You'll not need to keep it much longer, for my sake! And as for Fred's, you need not concern yourself about him; he don't deserve it. He's been a villain to me—a downright brute. Do you know that the *Count*, as we call him among ourselves, has come back from America?"

"Yes; I know it. Some one who recognised him saw him about three weeks ago on the Cheyne Walk, and you were his companion."

"Then I was recognised?"

"No, you were not; but the description given of Stanger's female companion was sufficient for me. The *scar* was mentioned, and your likeness to Annie was noticed! But do not fret yourself, Kitty; no one in the world, except Mrs. Derrington, knows that you were seen in such disreputable society."

"Disreputable, indeed! But I wanted to see him alone, and from a good motive, too. It was a fatal walk, though; I got up from a sick bed to take it, and caught an awful cold, which will be the end of me. I'm in what folks call a 'deep consumption;' I have been spitting blood for months."

"Surely this is a very bad place for you to live in? I am certain it is damp and cold."

"Damp and cold with a vengeance! But I have no choice; you don't know all! Let me tell you, while I have the strength left. I found out very soon after my marriage that my husband was a *scamp*. He hated work, and he was poor; he wanted to get rich all in a moment, he did

not care how. He began by frequenting gambling saloons and low betting places ; he got in with jockeys and horsey people ; he was known by all bad characters on the Turf. He took to card-sharping—I think they call it—and fortune somehow favoured his wickedness, and he got lots of money. But it didn't come in fast enough for him, and there was an uncertainty always that he couldn't put up with—though, I must say, he cheated splendidly, and knew every trick and dodge of the trade that there was to know. No one understood better than my worthless husband how to 'pluck a pigeon.' And woe to the poor, foolish pigeon who was so silly as to let himself be handled by him !”

“ I wonder he was never found out.”

“ He was found out many a time, but not thoroughly. He always managed to evade the grasp of the law ; though he nearly got caught when we gave those grand card-parties at Virginia House. Perhaps you never heard of them ? Mrs. Derrington knew about it, and gave us a wide berth. Then Fred got into another set. They called themselves *Chevaliers—Something!* and talked for all the world as if they were professors of the Arts and Sciences. But they were simply *thieves!*—housebreakers—burglars—robbers—whatever you will. There was a gang of them ; and Stanger—though his real name isn't Stanger—was supposed to be the leader. He stood at nothing, and he was clever—and oh ! so plausible and fascinating, and plumed himself on nearly always passing for what he appeared to be. How he did laugh at poor Queenie Osborne, though he always shrank from converse with her father—who could see through a stone wall he used to complain, and suspected him from the very first.”

“ But was Susanna South his wife ? ”

“ Yes, he was legally married to her ; at least, I believe he was, though that sort of man does not generally bother himself with any sort of tie he can't throw off at pleasure. But *Sophie*—she wasn't Susanna !—was wonderfully clever, and her services could not well be dispensed with. Besides, she was vindictive enough to ruin the whole company if any of them played her false : she was in all their secrets, and she could have denounced them all if she pleased.

She was a very dangerous person to have to do with, I assure you.

"I am certain she was. Even Queenie began to have her suspicions before the play was played out. I always had a secret horror of her; I was convinced that she was an arch deceiver—an accomplished, unscrupulous *liar*! Father had no faith in her; mother doubted her. Poor old nursie scolded herself for being uncharitable, but could not help judging her as an impostor. But, Kitty, who was Bella Fowkes?"

"Why, just Bella Fowkes—with half-a-dozen *aliases*. Your people took her for a common thief—a *burglar*! and they were not far wrong."

"Why did you send her to us? One look at her was enough. And she contradicted herself continually."

"Exactly! She was sent to the Osbornes as a *blind*, that I might never be suspected of providing the confidential attendant, who was really to be Stanger's chief accomplice. All that part of the affair was arranged for me; I had my orders, and had only to obey. I couldn't quite see the good of Fowkes going after the place; she wasn't wanted to 'suit.' It was just to put you off the scent, you see. The woman is in prison now; she was no adept in the craft; she didn't half know her trade—her 'profession,' these dreadful wretches call it."

"What a trade!—what a profession! Oh, Kitty, dear! how could you stoop to lend yourself to their vile impositions?"

"If you are married to such a scamp, you can't help yourself; you must 'do at Rome as Rome does'—as I've often heard say. But I got tired—dead tired—sick to loathing of the whole detestable business long, long ago. I believe it is just the dread and terror that has killed me; my health has been breaking down for more than two years. Oh! how many times I have prayed *to die*; to be forgiven my sins and die, you know! If I could only have been the wife of a poor, honest working man! And yet I always put too much value on show and splendour, and wanted to have lots and lots to spend. Now it's all over; I don't want for anything the world can give; it's not much I need

now. I only crave peace of conscience; and that a mis-spent life can never give."

"I am so thankful that you do feel the life to have been a sinful one! And, Kitty, there is forgiveness with *Him*."

"Yes, I know that; I wasn't brought up a heathen, you know. But it is no good crying for pardon if you don't sincerely repent."

"But you do repent, Kitty. You are like the prodigal who came to feed on the husks that the swine did eat; and you would arise and go to your Father, and say: 'I have sinned.' Is it not so?"

"I must make restitution first—such restitution as is in my power. The Romish Church is right when it tells you satisfaction must follow on confession. You see this key?"

"Yes. What a curious one it is!"

"It is what they call a 'master key,' I think. At any rate, it will open all sorts of locks, and, at the same time, what it locks can't be opened with any other key. Go into the next room, and you'll see a big cupboard—something like an iron safe. The keyhole is right in the middle; put the key in, and it will turn in a moment. Inside you'll see an old leather box with a strap round it; bring that box here, please. But first slip the bolt on the door you came in by; slip *both* bolts!"

Dolly did as she was requested, and then took the curious key and passed into the adjoining room, which seemed full of rubbish. The "safe," a very uncommon one, stood in the corner next the door; it was very easily opened, and there was the leather box, strong and much worn, but quite portable. Dolly carried it immediately to her sister, who was sitting up in bed, with eager eyes and a great red fever-spot on each hollow cheek. She had another and much smaller key in her thin, trembling hand.

"Take that," she said, giving it to Dolly. "First take off the strap, and then unlock the box."

Dolly did so, and the box seemed empty; there was a velvet jewel tray inside, but nothing in it.

"Lift that up, and touch the secret spring I shall show you," continued Kitty. "There; now raise the false bottom."

Dolly obeyed, and something well wrapped in "silver paper" appeared beneath. Kitty herself began removing the light covering; and as she did so she signed to Dolly to *look*.

"Surely," cried Dolly, trying, for the invalid's sake, to keep down the excitement she felt, "these are Queenie's *sapphires*!"

"These are Miss Osborne's celebrated 'star sapphires.' They are just as they were taken from her jewel-case. They were brought here for safety. The pearls went out of the country many months ago, and you will never see them again; but the gems were Fred's portion of the plunder—they were said, at least, to be *mine*, and they have been left in my keeping."

"Were they really given to you?"

"Of course not, for I could never think of wearing them. Stanger got away on to the Continent the very night that the robbery was committed, and he took the pearls and some solid plate that was collared with him. He had not much difficulty in turning his booty into hard cash. Of course, he speaks French and German perfectly, which Fred does not. He could manage it all, he said, and *he did*! He knew exactly to whom to go, and he knew the road, and could get away while Fred was thinking about it."

"But was Mr. Chapman concerned, then, in the robbery?"

"Not actually. As *you* were in the house, and Annie, too, it was deemed prudent that he should not put in an appearance, lest he should be recognised; you would both have known him, and Fred is not at all good at disguises. But he bargained for the *sapphires*, which was an unwise thing to do, for he might have got rid of the pearls; and as for the silver, there was always the melting pot, of course. But all the world knew that the sapphires were missing, and that a keen watch was kept for them, and kept up, too, for months and months. Fred did take them to Paris, but no one would have anything to do with them; the story of them had gone across the Channel, and, of course, it would have been madness to have shown them to any English

pawnbroker or jeweller. He tried to part the set, but still he could make nothing of it, and finally he was advised to keep them himself for a year or two longer, and, when opportunity occurred, make another venture. But last winter everything went wrong; the gang—the *partners*, they called themselves—had a run of ill-luck. Whatever they put their hands to failed, and two of them were done for, and came to downright grief. They were '*lagged*' and tried, and are now working out a long sentence of penal servitude. Fred just escaped by the skin of his teeth."

"Where is Fred now?"

"I don't at all know. He is in hiding somewhere in the provinces; he dare not come within miles of London. And, indeed, it does seem only prudent to be quiet till there is a lull in the proceedings. We have held this lonely old house for some years now; Fred bought it *for a purpose*, some time ago; but I am pretty sure we are watched—there are detectives about, I am positive. I wonder I have never been arrested on suspicion, and it would be suicidal for Fred to come back; I have lived in perpetual dread ever since Stanger turned up, about a month ago. He believes Fred has the sapphires with him, or they would not be still in my keeping, you may be pretty sure. But Stanger did not know this house was our own; he thought we rented it for awhile and then gave it up, and he does not actually know where to find me, for my last address was a country one. I took a house in Surrey—a few miles from Croydon; but I only lived in it a week. The furniture was hired, but I paid my rent in advance, in the name of Mrs. John Williams, a widow. No one but you knows where I am really at the present moment. And now, how will you put up those gimcracks, for I mean you to carry them away with you! They won't be safe here much longer, I feel convinced; I told you I would make *restitution*, and I shan't feel comfortable till they are in their rightful owner's hands. What will you do with them?"

"Take them to Queenie, of course, or else to one of her brothers."

"I know that. What I meant was, how will you carry them away from here?"

"I really do not know. They are such valuable things to have about you in travelling."

"They will be safe enough if you are careful, and don't lose your head. What is in that bag?"

"Nothing in particular—a light shawl, my purse, and a few small matters."

"You can carry the shawl across your arm, can't you? See! the sapphires can be made up in little packets, and the bag will hold them *nearly* all! Have you an under-pocket? Then what the bag won't take can go in the pocket, and something may be stowed away in the bosom of your dress, so secured that it won't slip out. Do you understand?"

"Yes, quite; but I shall be very nervous till I have got rid of the jewels—till I am safe at home."

"Don't be nervous, whatever you are. Only be quiet and self-possessed, and no one will guess that you have anything of value about you. You have only to keep the bag safely, not letting it go out of your hand; but do not *seem* one bit anxious, or you'll betray yourself! If I were you, I would get back to Camden Town as fast as possible, and take a cab from the first stand you find. I am afraid you will not get any conveyance nearer."

"Tiverton Road is very desolate. I did not like it as I came, and I am so tired."

"I dare say you are, but I think you are safe enough in this neighbourhood. Anyhow, you are all right when once you are in the main road; and you might light on a return cab, you know. But I think I would not trust the rail. I wish I could send for a conveyance, but I think I'd better not; I had to resort to stratagem last night to get that letter posted to you. I wondered whether you would ever get it! But I *was* relieved to see you, Dolly. Won't you come again? I fancy I shall last a few days, perhaps weeks, longer! And you'll let me die in peace?"

"Surely! you shall not be disturbed. I will come again very soon, and I know Mrs. Derrington will come, too; you are always safe with her."

"Thank you! Now I think you had better go; only first replace that leather box in the safe, and lock it up as

it was before. Don't let us leave any traces of what we've been doing. I have no trust in these women who are in the house. There! I'll put the keys out of sight; I know my own hiding-places. Now, Dolly, kiss me, for I *may* never see you again; you're a good child; and give my love to Annie! Now, once more, good-bye; and have your wits about you, and get back home as fast as you possibly can. Don't leave your sunshade behind you—you'll want it. Dear me! I feel a world better now that I have relieved my mind. Bless you! No, I did not mean to say that, for *my* blessing can be little better than a curse! Now I am going to have a mad fit of coughing—I wonder I've kept it off so long!"



CHAPTER XXXI.

SEVERAL EVENTS TRANSPIRE.

WITH the jewels securely packed, Dolly bade adieu to China Place; she fancied the snuffy-looking female, who seemed to be on duty, either as "nurse" or gaoler, regarded her with a most suspicious expression of countenance. She would fain have detained the young lady awhile, on the plea of holding a discussion on the subject of Mrs. Chapman's state of health; but Dolly, who was nervous to the last degree, and had the greatest difficulty in repressing the agitation that so nearly overpowered her, lost no time in taking her departure. She could scarcely feel quite assured that the keen, black beady eyes of the slovenly woman were not actually penetrating the inmost recesses of her small morocco hand-bag, and it seemed as if the shrewd sinister glances *must* perceive that she had something heavier than usual in her dress-pocket, while she gathered up the folds of her skirt about her, as if to preserve them from contact with the dusty, dirty ground.

It was a great relief to her when she found herself beyond the garden precincts, and once again in the desolate Tiverton Road ; and, as you may well believe, she lost no time in making the best of her way into the broad thoroughfare which would lead her directly to the railway station. She was most thankful when she found herself once more retracing the path she had taken earlier in the day ; and at last she found herself in comparatively respectable quarters, and the bustle of the High Street became not only audible, but perceptible.

A few yards beyond the railway-arch there was a cab rank, and at least half-a-dozen ramshackle conveyances were waiting to be hired. Dolly had but to pause for a moment, and the foremost cab drew up, ready to await her orders. It was a long drive to Clapham, but the man did not hesitate as to distance, for his horse was "not really tired," he said, and would be all the better for a good long trot ; but he intimated that the fare would be "something extra." And Dolores was altogether too tired, as well as anxious, to find herself safely on the "Surrey side," to trouble herself as to the bargain that might probably be made ; she was only too thankful to find herself safely ensconced on the dusty cushions of the jolting cab, which was to carry her direct to her final destination.

But the bony quadruped that undertook the job was either tired or lazy, for he got on but slowly ; and the church clock on the Common was on the stroke of five when at last "The Acacias" was within sight. The house seemed almost asleep when Dolly found herself safely within it. "Mother" was still taking her afternoon nap, the parlourmaid assured her ; Mrs. Fairfax was reading in the garden, and Miss Osborne had not come in from her walk. Of course the gentlemen had not yet arrived, for the master himself had gone to the City that morning.

"Tell your mistress I am at home, if she asks for me," said Dolly ; and then, well content to be left undisturbed a little longer, she went to her own room, where, having locked herself in, she proceeded to contemplate anew the unexpectedly restored sapphires.

Yes ; there they were ! just as they had looked on the

night of the birthday ball ; not one ornament was absent ; not one sparkling gem was the worse for its sojourn in China Place or elsewhere. The gold-setting was perhaps a little duller for want of due attention, but that was all. A very slight application of the ordinary chamois leather would restore the entire *parure* to its normal brilliance.

"But to whom shall I hand it over?" questioned Dolly of herself, after she was quite satisfied that the jewels were really undimmed in splendour, and that not a single stone was missing. "And though I am in nowise to blame, I feel as if I shared in some way in the detention of the things that have been lost so long. Oh, to think they have been in poor Kitty's keeping all this time! To think, too, that she—my own sister—is concerned in the robbery; that *her* fortunes are linked with those of common house-breakers and burglars—that she may be liable to prosecution. And yet, I feel sure, the poor thing will be unmolested. She will be allowed to die in peace. The Osbornes will bring Stanger, and even Chapman to justice—they ought to do so; but I think, as far as Kitty is concerned, they will be satisfied to accept *restitution*. Oh, dear, how tired I am! How very tired! I feel as if I had lived through months of care and perplexity since I dressed this morning, in this very room; I think I will take a little repose; I am really sleepy. An hour's quiet rest will compose my senses, and give me the bodily strength I need; I need not dress for dinner till the clock strikes six at the earliest. I will put all that I need in readiness, so that, if I oversleep myself, I shall not be dreadfully hurried."

But Dolly was so overpoweringly fatigued, that she could not decide upon the lace or ribbons she wished to wear. She just threw the first dinner dress that was in her wardrobe across a chair, and flung herself carelessly on to the bed, where she was almost immediately sound asleep. She did not awake till some one knocked at her door, and she sprang up with only a few minutes left in which to make her evening toilet. The dinner-bell rang out before she was ready to descend; and all were seated at the table, and the soup was in process of being served, when at length she made her tardy appearance.

"The *late* Miss Derrington!" was Philip's greeting, as Dolly took her usual place. "I really cannot remember your being late for dinner before, Dolly. And Queenie is late at least once a week."

"I took an unusually long walk this morning," replied Dolly, trying to speak in her ordinary tone; "and I was so tired, that I indulged in a *siesta* and overslept myself. I just managed to get on a dress and hurry down; I am afraid I am in a very untidy condition!"

"Oh, you are tidy enough!" rejoined Mrs. Fairfax; "but you are generally something *more* than tidy. However simple your dress is, it is always tasteful and scrupulously neat, and everything is in perfect keeping. But you do look tired, child; you have over-exerted yourself, I am sure. You should remember you are not so strong as Queenie. You look quite pale."

"Nay; I was admiring Miss Derrington's fine bloom," interrupted Frank Howard, who was sitting by Queenie. It was certainly the third time he had dined at "The Acacias" within the week! And Dolly's cheeks were glowing as the attention of the whole party was turned towards herself. Her complexion was just then unwontedly brilliant; and Aunt Rachel could not but note how quickly her colour flushed and faded, and regret that she had drawn all regards upon the girl, who was undoubtedly, for some cause or other, slightly excited. Chrissie, who knew where Dolly had been that morning, thought only how very weary she looked, and feared that she had been exposed to some small annoyance. Queenie seemed quite too much absorbed in her own affairs to have any leisure to bestow upon Dolly's, and she had some confidence to exchange with Frank just then, so that no further remarks passed on Dolores' appearance, and no one noticed that Miss Derrington sent away her soup nearly untasted.

It was almost an hour later than usual when the party left the dining-room; Mrs. Fairfax and her sister resumed a conversation in which they were interested; Queenie and Mr. Howard strolled away to the extremity of the grounds; and Philip and his father had something to say to each other in the library. Dolly, by way of occupying herself,

took up a book that she and Queenie had begun to read ; but she did not, and could not, concern herself with the progress of the story that had seemed so very interesting only yesterday. In fact, she held the volume upside down, and thought nothing at all about it ; though, happily for her peace, no one noticed her extraordinary absorption.

Seeing that all were paired, save herself, and still uncertain as to the manner of the revelation she would have to make, Dolly quietly withdrew to her own room, and, giving up all pretences, sat down by the window to watch the couple promenading under the trees below, and at the same time to reflect on what should be her own immediate course of action. The sapphires were securely locked in the old *escritoire*. She had but little hope of being able to secure a private interview with Philip that evening ; and perhaps it would be quite as well to defer all communications till she had had time to reflect a little longer. And yet—and yet—she could not rest ; she was almost afraid she could not sleep till the jewels were actually out of her keeping. To think that not a creature in all the house even guessed that the “star-sapphires” had returned to their lawful home !

“It is almost dark, and I am sure I smell coffee,” said Dolly to herself, as she rose and looked upon the darkening scene without. “I think I will go down to the drawing-room and see if I am wanted. I fancy Queenie is still out of doors ! I saw the flutter of her white muslin among the bushes not many minutes’ since. I wonder what poor Kitty is doing now ? Ah !—I ought to have written to Mrs. Derrington to-night. How stupid I have been ! She would have been here, had I urged it, quite early to-morrow morning ; and I do so need advice. Though I suppose, after all, there is but one thing to do ; it is only a question of speaking out, sooner or later.”

Just then there was a tap at the door—a very gentle tap ; and Queenie’s voice was heard, demanding admittance.

“Come in, dear,” was Dolly’s quick response ; “the key is not turned.”

As indeed it was not ; though the *escritoire* was securely locked, as it had been for several years back.

"Have they brought in tea? I see the lamps are lighted. I am quite ready, Queenie."

"Tea is downstairs, and mother and auntie are drinking it. But never mind tea just yet, Dolly; I have something—something quite out of the common way—to tell you. Yes, quite out of the common way. I have a piece of news for you that I think will please you. You will never guess what it is; and yet—I don't know—you may not be altogether unprepared. Well?"

"I should say your news, dear, refers to Mr. Howard: he has proposed, and he is accepted."

"What a clever little thing you are! That is just it; we are engaged—that is to say, if the *pater* is in no way opposed. We have been engaged a full half-hour, I should say. Dolly, what do you think of it? Will there be any opposition?"

"I do not suppose there will be any; Mr. Howard would not have been made free of the house so easily if there had been any ground of objection. Father and mother both think highly of Frank, I know; and your brothers are almost as much in love with him as you can be yourself."

"I am glad to know there will be no fuss. Frank is in the library now, speaking to father and to Philip. And—what do you think yourself, Dolly?"

"I think you have made a most excellent selection, Queenie. We all have the very highest opinion of Mr. Howard; and Philip will be delighted. And—and you are quite sure that you really *love* him?"

"Of course, I am; it has been rather a protracted affair. I have walked—not *fallen* into love, you see! And oh! it is such a comfort to think that my future is settled, and that I shall have no more trouble about admirers or lovers. Frank Howard is just the man for me—is he not?"

"He is, undoubtedly, if you prefer him, and if he is your father's and your brothers' choice also. Your preference does you honour, for he is a thoroughly good man, and, as we all know from experience, of a sweet and unselfish disposition."

"He is clever, too—in a way, that is. At first, I did not feel quite sure about myself; because I always meant

to make a figure in the world when I married, and Frank is not exactly a person to set the Thames on fire! He might be a little more brilliant than he is—a little more fascinating; but I am satisfied, and he is devotedly in love with me. That foolish dream of a coronet has melted quite away—I am marrying in my own station, and that is enough.”

“You know exactly who Frank is, and all about him.”

“Yes; I know his family as well as I know my own, and I am almost sure that his is a little better than mine. He is well descended and well connected, and he is by no means poor.”

“I should say not; for he is his uncle’s heir. He need not trouble himself with any kind of business, unless he feel disposed. I heard Philip saying so, only the other day; he cannot be suspected of courting you for your fortune.”

“That is a very good thing, for I should hate of all things to be married for my money! I must be married for myself; and I think I deserve it, Dolly; I shall make an excellent wife, I am sure! I always knew I should, provided I could find a man just to my taste. Now, Frank really meets all my requirements.”

“I think he must. He is a good Christian man, and of a naturally sweet, genial nature. You may be very happy with him, if you will, Queenie. James and John do not think him devoid of genius by any means; he is very well read.”

“I suppose he is ‘well read,’ and what is called *cultured*; although that may mean anything, or nothing, you know. A man is cultured or the reverse, according to the judgment of his associates. ‘Culture’ is a matter of opinion, if not of taste. I am not quite sure what is my own rendering of the term.”

“Never mind, dear, Frank will be quite cultured enough to satisfy his wife. He has plenty of good sound sense; his education has been well attended to, and, what is better still, he has attended to it himself.”

“He is not accomplished, though; he plays no musical instrument, he likes hymn-singing, but he has no voice; and he speaks no language but his own.”

"He is a very fair classical scholar, I believe."

"Yes; he knows enough Latin and Greek to pass muster in society; but his French is worth nothing at all, and his German is just good for nothing. I always meant to have an accomplished man for my husband; that is to say, a brilliant one who could talk well, and on any subject; one who could hold his own, in any of the best circles, at home or abroad. Still, I suppose, Dolly, one can't have everything, can one?"

"No, indeed; and I must say, I think your usual good fortune attends you. You will find him quite good enough for every day life, I am persuaded; he has considerable conversational powers; and best of all, he is entirely satisfied with yourself, and loves you with all his heart."

"Of course he does! If I had the smallest doubt in my own mind; if I had not been absolutely convinced of his devotion, if he had been a lukewarm lover, I should never have referred him to my father. I should have simply dismissed him without consulting any one; just as I did Herbert Conway, you know, who was, after all, my inferior, actually three months younger than myself! Of course, I had not a moment's hesitation."

"I agree with you, dear—the man ought to be the elder to the woman; he should be first in every particular."

"Of course he should. That is one reason why I so cordially receive Frank as my betrothed. He will be thirty-four next birthday, while I shall be only twenty."

"Some people would say that was an excess of seniority. Florence Paterson holds that the husband should not be more than seven years the wife's senior. I think it is simply a question of taste or of judgment—perhaps of feeling."

"Perhaps it is; and my feeling is decidedly in favour of a husband just fourteen years older than myself. Of course, Florence's husband only exceeds her own age by seven years. What a comfort it is that we are differently minded! But, Dolly, do you really, and from your very heart, congratulate me?"

"That I do, darling; you could not have secured a better husband, I am well convinced. I wish you every happiness,

dear—every possible happiness. I pray God that your married life may be altogether blessed.”

And then the girls embraced each other with effusion, and the eyes of both streamed with happy tears ; and Queenie added, “I wish you shared my full content, Dolly. I should like us both to be married together. I suppose you *could not* think of Mr. Pemberton ? ”

“No, I could not ; I do not, and could not, entertain the smallest affection for him. And, Queenie, I do think I shall live and die unmarried.”

“Live and die a spinster ! No, indeed, Dolly, that you will not. You are not exactly my rival in beauty, I know ; but you are handsome enough, and some people might prefer your clear olive skin and raven locks to my ivory complexion and golden-brown ringlets. There is no accounting for tastes, especially in the matter of beauty. Every man thinks his own dear love the loveliest. And, Dolly, you will never go dowerless to a home of your own ; I have heard both father and mother say that you are well entitled to a snug little fortune of your own. You will have your own portion, I know, dear ; indeed, I will take good care of that. You shall share my good luck in all things.”

“Thank you a thousand times, Queenie, for all your goodness. Married, or single, I shall be comfortably provided for, I am assured ; the father has told me so a half a dozen times ; and it was a good day for me when it was decided that I should come here, and share your fortunes—so to speak ; I owe so much, so very much, to you and yours, Queenie, dear ; I can never be sufficiently grateful.”

“And I owe a great deal to your sweetness and goodness ; you have been my sister ever since that first Christmas-day we spent together, ever so many years ago. Yes, you have been a great blessing to me, in a thousand ways, Dolly ; I should have been ever so much worse than I am, but for you ; I always say you have goodness enough for the pair of us.” And Queenie’s tears ran apace down her daintily-curved cheeks ; she was given to deep emotion, upon occasion, and she was perfectly sincere. She was overflowing with happiness ; her bliss was almost too deep for expression.

"Now I must go and bathe my eyes," said she, as she wiped away the tears; "I am such a foolish thing, I am always ready to cry, and I must say 'good night' to Frank before he goes; I hope he will understand that I wept for pure happiness."

Presently, Dolly heard Queenie descending the stairs, and she hesitated a little whether she should or should not follow her. But no; she was really very tired, and she felt that she could scarcely trust herself to speak with due composure; her head was aching a little, too, and she would be far better in solitude. She would go to mother's room, and say "good night" the last thing, after Frank had gone away.

"But I will just write a line to Mother Derrington, before I go to bed; if I wrote it immediately, perhaps Frank would drop it in the post, and I should get some kind of answer—perhaps herself—by ten o'clock to-morrow morning. Just a word or two will be sufficient; Fanny will see that Mr. Howard gets it."

She went to the schoolroom, as her own inkstand had not been replenished—indeed, both she and Queenie, as a rule, wrote their letters in the old schoolroom, where there was always plenty of convenient stationery at disposal. The note was soon written, the bell rung, and Fanny charged to give it to Mr. Howard as he was leaving the house. Then she prepared to go to her own room, that she might be ready for retiring when Mrs. Osborne and Queenie came upstairs. It was already quite half-past ten o'clock.

Dolly, whose habits were of the neatest, stopped to put away not only her own paper-case but Queenie's, which was lying all upset on the table she commonly used; several books were also returned to their places on the shelves, and she was just about to lower the gas when she heard steps, well-known steps, in the corridor without, and she was immediately cognizant of Philip's approach.

"I fancied I should find you here," said he, as he entered the room. "I hoped you had not gone to bed, as I had something to say to you. Of course you know what has happened this evening? You know that the engagement we have all wished for is *un fait accompli*?"

"Yes; dear Queenie came to my room when Mr. Howard went into the library. She is very happy, I think."

"And so are we! Nothing could have been more appropriate. There cannot be a mistake about Frank, and he does know something about Stanger."

"And what he knows makes no difference! I am so glad that it was all over long ago; that Queenie was so speedily disillusioned."

"She could not be anything else; there is rather too much disenchantment in finding out that one's devoted lover is a professed burglar. But she was easily deluded in the first instance. You would never have been such an utter dupe, I am sure."

"I think not; indeed, I may say, I am sure not. Perhaps he was not so much upon his guard with me; I was not worth powder and shot, you know."

"I suppose you were not, and no loss to you either. But, Dolly, I came to say something special: I have been on the eve of saying it a dozen times. I wish now that it had been said a year ago, and the matter happily settled—it might just as well have been so."

"What might have been?—Queenie's engagement?"

"Not exactly; another engagement—yours and mine, Dolly! Queenie will go away soon, and find a new home for herself, but there is no reason why we should desert the old nest; we could join issues with the parent birds, could we not? We, the last of the brood, could scarcely leave the dear old folk alone. What do you say, dearest?"

"About what, Philip; I am afraid I scarcely understand."

"I think you do, Dolly! nay, I am nearly sure that you do. Let another engagement be announced to-night. Why should not you and I make up our minds as well as the others? You must know that I love you, Dolly—that I have loved you dearly—*dearly*, almost since you were a child! That I have loved you more than ever since you came home from Paris! And, Dolly, my sweet, I have dared to fancy—to believe, that you care something for me. Say, is it not so?"

"What shall I say, Philip ; what can I say?"

"Say yes ! that will be quite enough ; say that you will be my own dear wife, and stay with me, to comfort the old people, when all the other nestlings have flown. The *pater* and *mater* will be glad, I know ; it is just what they would wish."

"I am not at all sure of that, Philip ; I know I do not, must not wish it myself."

"Dolly ! And I was so sure of your affection ; was I presumptuous ? Has any one been before me ? I ought to have spoken earlier."

"No one has been before you, and I would give the world if you had not spoken now. For, Philip, I cannot, may not, be your wife ! I love you too well to dream of marrying you ; it would indeed be a poor return to the Osbornes for all I owe them, if I permitted them to ally themselves with infamy and disgrace. Don't ask me to explain to-night, I have gone through too much to-day to bear an atom more. But I will tell you, I feel sure I *must* tell you to-morrow, why it is that you and I can never be more to each other than we have been through life. Let me go now, please, Philip ; if I rest awhile I shall have gained composure by the morning."

"Whatever may be wrong with your family, Dolly, my dear, I am perfectly certain that neither infamy nor disgrace can attach to you. Has that wretched Stanger anything to do with the enigma?"

"In one sense, perhaps, he has."

"He is no relation of yours?"

"Thank God, *no* ! But there are others, almost as culpable, if not quite so ; those who are of my own blood ! I hear the party breaking-up down stairs. Philip, let us say 'good-night' now. I will see you to-morrow morning, the first thing ; the explanation cannot longer be deferred, and to you the first utterance is due. They are coming up-stairs, let me go ; I cannot face any one to-night. To-morrow you shall know all, and be free to speak as you like."

And then Dolly rushed away to her own room and shut herself in, only just escaping Queenie and Mrs. Fairfax by

taking the servants' corridor. Contrary to her expectation she slept heavily, and when she awoke it was the morning; she remembered on the instant all that had happened on the preceding day, and began to brace herself for the inevitable ordeal.

The house was quite still, as she dressed herself; but she heard muffled footsteps passing her door, and she knew that they must be Philip's, on his way to the old school-room, where she had hastily promised to meet him. As she left her own chamber, she unlocked the *escritoire*, and took thence the restored jewels, that had so marvellously come into her keeping.

"With these in my hands, I shall find courage to begin the story," she whispered to herself; "now, the sooner the tale is told the better."

Two minutes more and she was in the old schoolroom; Philip was there already. He had opened the window, and the sweet fresh breeze blew in from the Common, bearing the cool, fragrant air of the early morning.

"You keep faithful tryst," said the young man, as Dolly, with heavy eyes and purple-ringed eyelids, in spite of her heavy slumbers, made her appearance. "But, my dearest, how pale and wan you look! What has befallen? What has taken all the light and life out of your bonnie face—making you, in outward seeming, at least, worthy of your name?"

"Yes; worthy of my name—*Dolores*! Philip—look at these?"

"At those jewels? Why! They are, they must be, Queenie's 'star sapphires'! Where did you find them, my child?"

"I *found* them nowhere. They were placed in my hands only yesterday. They have been for two years and more in the keeping of my sister — my eldest sister, Kitty Chapman!"

"*Your* sister? Oh, Dolly!"

"My own sister! But I must plead a little for her, Philip; she is not *quite* as guilty as she appears; and she is dying—dying; and ere she appears before God, she would make such restitution as is in her power."

"Was she, then, Stanger's real wife?"

"No; the person we were accustomed to call Susanna South was Stanger's wife—his lawful wedded wife, I believe. Kitty is Fred Chapman's wife, and he is Stanger's confederate. Between them, and aided by Queenie's vain folly, they planned the robbery."

"Surely, Susanna was an accomplice!"

"She was as guilty as Stanger—Fred Chapman scarcely less so; only he did not appear on the scene of action. As for Kitty—poor Kitty, she was weak, and she had no sterling principle; but she was not a free agent."

"And the pearls—where are they?"

"Gone, finally, I fear; indeed, I am pretty sure they are lost for ever. They fell to Stanger's share of the booty, and he disposed of them abroad, almost immediately. The plate, too, that we missed, went with the pearls; nothing remains save these sapphires, which are just as they were stolen."

"Tell me all about it, dearest; let me have the story from the very beginning, if it will not pain you too much to tell it. But, Dolly, my darling, be quite sure of this, no one will ever blame *you*! Your kith and kin have sinned, and have disgraced their name; you are innocent as the angels of God, my child. You shall not bear that tainted name many weeks longer. You are sweet and pure, and beloved as ever!"

"It is very dear of you to say so, Philip; but I must bear my own burden. I must pay the bitter penalty of being of my own flesh and blood; I can never, never be the wife of any honourable man!"

"It is still fresh upon you, the shock you have received; you will see differently some day, Dolly—my *own* Dolly—for all that has been, or that may yet be!"

"The shock fell upon me yesterday in all its terrible force; but oh, Philip, I have had my suspicions for months—for years! almost ever since the jewels disappeared. I was as positive as could be, without corroborative evidence, that Kitty was the means of placing 'Susanna'—*Sophie* was her real name—about Queenie, personally. I am afraid I must be accounted guilty, for I kept my secret; from the

very first, I had a miserable suspicion that my unhappy sister was implicated. And Kitty was the person who was seen with Stanger, some weeks ago, walking up and down Cheyne Walk. She has confessed everything now, and she has made such restitution as was possible."

"But you did not absolutely *know* that your sister was guilty of complicity."

"No! oh, no! And yet, I did know; though I could not have proved it. I feared it; then I dreaded that it was so. At last, it came upon me, like a revelation; I was always thinking of it; it was 'borne in upon my mind,' as our friends the Quakers say."

"Still, dear, I cannot be persuaded that, personally, *you* are to blame. If you can, tell me the whole story, so far, at least, as I do not know it. Or would you rather wait awhile?"

"I would rather tell it now, I think."

And Dolly commenced with the finding of the rough sheet, which the detectives had failed to discover, in the cashmere dress; and finished with the full confession made to herself, not many hours before. And, painful as was the effort, it was a relief unspeakable to poor Dolly to have the weight of that dread secret no longer on her heart.

"And now, Philip, what is to be done?"

"I must think it over, dear, and consult with our brothers—perhaps with my father. But what should you advise?—how would *you* wish us to proceed?"

"That is more than I can tell you at present. My only desire, as far as I know my own mind, is that Queenie should have her sapphires, and that Kitty should be spared."

"Most certainly, poor Mrs. Chapman shall be undisturbed; even her wicked husband shall remain unsought, as long as she lives. And she is dying, you say?"

"Dying, beyond the shadow of a doubt; and now that she has confessed the truth, she is anxious to be gone. She would not betray Fred: she gave me no idea of his whereabouts; and, on the whole, I am glad she did not. The entire gang is in trouble, and keeping out of the way; I should not wonder if it were Stanger's return that revived the hue-and-cry against them."

"Very likely. And I think I should be satisfied if we could but lay hands on Stanger. As to Chapman, we will not concern ourselves about him so long as his wife is living. If we succeed in capturing 'the Count,' and two or three others, whose names we have ascertained, I dare say some one will turn Queen's evidence, and expose the whole affair. None of these men ought to be free to work their evil will in the world ; they must not be at liberty a day longer than can be helped."

"And poor Kitty, at all events, may remain undisturbed ? "

"Kitty shall be as undisturbed as if she were my own sister—for your kith and kin are certainly mine, Dolly, whatever may betide. I do not think any of our people will seek to trouble her—I will take care the police do not get upon her track ; nothing can possibly be gained now from her : even Scotland Yard must be convinced of that."

"The only thing I fear is her being in such unscrupulous hands : she had to communicate with me by stratagem. But I think no one guessed that the sapphires were in her possession ; even Stanger supposed that they had been taken away by Fred. So I do hope she will not be molested in that lonely place ; but that note that Mr. Howard posted last night was to my stepmother, and, I doubt not, she will be here within an hour or two. She will know what is best to be done for Kitty, for she ought not to be left to die alone in that desolate place, and with no Christian person near her."

"She did not offer any direct information respecting Stranger ? "

"None whatever ! She owned to having been seen in his company, several weeks ago. She met him for a purpose—'a good purpose,' she said, and at much risk to herself. She did not even hint at his present whereabouts."

"Our official friends are on the look-out for him ; but they are convinced he is hiding somewhere in the country. It was very risky of him to be seen in London. Strangely enough, nobody appears to have caught a glimpse of him save Mrs. Paterson ; and, of course, Mrs. Chapman."

"And I think, Philip, I have told you now all that I

have to tell. I shall go back to my own room and stay there for the present ; I am quite too unwell to come down to breakfast. Will you ask Aunt Rachel to send me up some tea and bread-and-butter ? Beg her to send it—not bring it—I could not talk to any one just now. And perhaps you will not mind telling all the others what I have told you ? Tell my stepmother, too, when she comes, as I feel persuaded she will before twelve o'clock. Ask Mrs. Fairfax to tell her, if you leave earlier for town."

"But will you not see her yourself?"

"Yes, I will ; but not till she has heard all the story of yesterday. I feel as if I must rest awhile and keep silence. I will not even *think*, if I can help it ; I will go to sleep, if I can, when I have had some breakfast ; and, *please*, I do not think I could interview Queenie till I feel more composed. I leave the sapphires in your hands ; they have been a terrible weight of responsibility to me for the last eighteen hours. I feel as though I should rest quietly now."

"I trust you will, dear. Go back to bed, and I will see that you have all you can possibly want, and that you are quite undisturbed. Ah, Queenie *will* be astonished ! They shall breakfast in peace, and then I will ask them to come into the library, where none of the servants will intrude. And there I will tell my story, and—produce the *sapphires*."



CHAPTER XXXII.

CHINA PLACE ONCE MORE.

I NEED not narrate the strange story of those marvellous "star sapphires" once again. It is quite enough to say that Mr. Osborne, and Mrs. Fairfax, and Queenie, could scarcely find words to express their astonishment when Philip told the tale to which he had risen so early to listen, and finished by placing the gems before the assembled family. Neither is it requisite to repeat the comments

which echoed all around when Philip ceased to speak ; the less so, that quite an hour before she was at all expected, Mrs. Derrington appeared upon the scene. The jewels had been restored to their daintily lined jewel-cases, and were lying open on the table when she entered.

She stopped short, and looked inquiringly into the faces of all present, exclaiming only—"they are found !" She had only seen them once, and that on the night of the memorable birthday ball, but she recognised them at a glance, "almost *before* she saw them !" as she told her husband afterwards.

And then the whole history had to be gone through again, and all that had taken place at Camden New Town to be described minutely for the benefit of Mrs. Derrington, as Philip was extremely anxious to save Dolly, as far as was possible, from any further recital.

"My poor child ! 'it was enough to kill her !" said the good step-mother, mournfully shaking her head. "Do you think she will see me at all to-day, Mr. Philip ?"

"If you do not mind waiting awhile, I am sure she will be anxious to see you, Mrs. Derrington. She was so much exhausted and at the time so hysterical, that she felt her only refuge to be solitude, and, if possible, sleep. She said she would want to see you when she had taken some repose ; and she begged me to give you all particulars. I know she wishes to consult you about her unhappy sister, whom she supposes to be *dying*—and dying alone, with no one at her side save aliens, and perhaps foes."

"I can quite believe that she is dying. I wanted to go to her several weeks ago, but her miserable little note gave no address. I had reason to suppose that she was somewhere in Surrey—not very far from Croydon, I imagined. I never thought for an instant of Camden Town, and I never even heard of 'China Place,' though I did live once somewhere in the neighbourhood in my first husband's time."

"Very few people have heard of it, I imagine ; Dolly was almost giving up the search from pure fatigue, when unexpectedly she stumbled upon it. It is in a most lonely district, she tells us ; China Place consists of several old

houses that seemed stranded, as it were, among broken ground, stagnant ditches, clay-pits, and decayed market gardens. And the house in which Mrs. Chapman has found refuge is a sort of ruined mansion, almost a mile away from any finished human habitation. If it is near any civilised place at all it is nearest to Camden New Town, which is, so far, nothing but an unfinished, howling wilderness of bricks and mortar. How London is spreading itself out! Camden New Town will be a populous and respectable place *some day*, I dare say."

"I suppose I shall be able to find my way there, especially as Dolly will be able to direct me. I think, Mrs. Fairfax, my wisest plan would be to return home immediately, give a few needful directions, and leave a message for Mr. Derrington; then return here, and see Dolly as soon as she is ready to receive me."

"Would not a note to Vine Cottage do as well?" suggested Mrs. Fairfax. "I am pretty sure a servant could be despatched with it as soon as written; could she not, Queenie? And then your strength would not be wasted in going and returning to Brixton Hill, for you will need it in getting to Camden Town, according to all accounts, to say nothing of what may await you there."

"That would certainly save time, if Mrs. Osborne could spare a messenger; and I have not a great deal of strength to lose, I must confess. Which will be my nearest way to Camden Town, Mr. Philip?"

"To tell the truth, I hardly know, Mrs. Derrington. Dolly went by rail and returned by cab, chiefly, I suppose, because she was burdened with the responsibility of the sapphires, which were no light charge for a young lady to carry, unattended, across London. Also, I should say, she was about as tired as she could be, for she seemed to have wandered a weary long way in search of this China Place! What with travel, and heat, and dust, and agitation, poor Dolly was dead beat; I have never seen her so thoroughly worn out. I fancy my mother will not require her carriage to-day; I am sure she will have much pleasure in placing it at your disposal, Mrs. Derrington. That will be quite the easiest way of settling the difficulty."

"You are extremely kind, Mr. Philip, but I think I would rather take a hired carriage, as it will excite less attention in such a neighbourhood as you describe. Dolly will tell me the exact point to which I should aim. I need not drive quite all the way, for I shall be equal to a tolerable walk. Now, if you will allow me, I will write my notes, for I must despatch two—one for my servant, who will want orders for the day, and the other for my husband, to explain what may turn out to be an absence prolonged beyond the evening."

The notes were scarcely finished, and on their way to Vine Cottage, when Fanny appeared with the news that Miss Derrington had rung her bell, and inquired if Mrs. Derrington had arrived at "The Acacias"; and, if so, would be glad to see her, as soon as she was sufficiently rested.

"You must have a glass of wine before you go upstairs," said Mrs. Fairfax, "for you will want all your forces; you will see for yourself if Dolly requires anything, for I think, all things considered, she had better remain at present undisturbed by any one save yourself."

"And while you interview Dolly, I will pay my mother a visit," pursued Philip. "She knows nothing of what has taken place, save that Dolly was summoned to her eldest sister yesterday morning, and there has been no opportunity for making explanations since her return. My father thought I should be the best person to tell the story, inasmuch as I am something of a *conteur*; and my sister's attention is, just now, a good deal occupied."

So Mrs. Derrington found her way to Dolly, and Philip rapped at the door of his mother's sitting-room, where she mostly spent her mornings. Chrissie, as yet, knew only that Dolly had found her way to Camden Town and back again, and she was rather surprised at having received from her no tidings; but the bustle of the household on the preceding evening, and the little excitement that naturally prevailed on the announcement of Queenie's betrothal, had banished a good many minor things from her remembrance. She little dreamed that the "star-sapphires" were once again in the possession of their lawful owner; still less,

that they had been restored to their natural *habitat* by Dolores.

Mrs. Derrington found Dolly much more composed than she had ventured to expect. She was very grave and quiet, and most thankful to discover—what indeed she had trusted would be the case—that her stepmother knew almost as much of the story as it was possible to tell her. Philip had amply fulfilled his promise; he had repeated almost word for word what had passed at China Place. The questions that needed to be put now were such as affected chiefly the unfortunate Mrs. Chapman.

“And is she quite alone?” asked Mrs. Derrington, presently.

“More than alone, mother. She fears the women who are with her, I am sure. I only wonder they allowed us to be alone so long together; but I think they did not at all suspect what really was taking place. Kitty said that no one save her husband, who was ‘hundreds of miles away,’ knew that the jewels were in her possession. The bolts that prevented surprise were securely drawn while I explored the iron safe in the lumber-room, and a curtain, a very thick curtain, was drawn over the outer door, so that no prying eyes could detect our movements. We spoke, too, so under our breath that nothing, I am confident, could be overheard. But, oh, mother, dear! she ought not to be left to die in this worse than solitary condition.”

“Is she very near death, Dolly? What is your opinion?”

“I have not had much experience of fatal illness, you know; but I should say two or three days—less than a week—will end it. She has been in a very bad way, I am convinced, for months; consumption must have set its fatal seal upon her at least a year ago, by her own account of herself. Then she has had no proper nursing, and, perhaps, a very improper diet; the anxiety, too, of her position, and the shame and remorse that she has endured, have all helped to kill her. Poor, poor Kitty! Then she took a fresh cold that evening she was out on the riverside, and the lungs were in too weak a state to bear any access of disease, inflammation set in, I should say, then extreme exhaustion. I should not wonder if she slipped away a few

hours after our conversation yesterday. She *could not* die, she said, till she had made 'confession and restitution.' Having disburdened her soul, I think she would go very rapidly."

"I am so glad you went at once, Dolly. I am thankful that no time has been lost, any way. What does she need most, think you?"

"I should not fancy she needs anything save tenderness and consolation! She has plenty of money, she says; and though the place itself looks dreary enough, she evidently wants for nothing. Wine and jelly, and tea and coffee, besides other things, were plentiful. Perhaps, if you took her some soothing cough-lozenges, they might be serviceable. She certainly can get nothing outside her own home, in that wilderness of a road."

"Are there no shops?"

"None of any account. Even in the main road there are only chandlers' and bakers' shops of the poorest description. There are wretched greengrocers', too, and an unpleasant-looking dairy. Of course, there is the inevitable public-house—and more than one, alas! There was not even a chemist's shop of any repute—though I did notice that 'castor oil' and 'cod-liver oil' were to be had in one place, where 'Colman's Mustard' and 'Reckitt's Blue' were also to be obtained. And the blue, and the mustard, and the oil seemed to be about the extent of the civilisation of the neighbourhood. Yes; you had better take a supply of good lozenges from one of the shops on our own 'Pavement.'"

"I wonder if she has any eggs; and, oh!—did she say whether she had seen a proper doctor?"

"She has had advice, I know, and good advice, too—expensive advice, certainly!—for she mentioned several names of note. But of late she has 'sought no physicians,' she says; for all are agreed that her case is hopeless, and she has known for weeks that the end is drawing near. But you will see for yourself, mother; you will judge better than I could, and you will know how to act. And have you money with you? for on such an expedition it is impossible to say what may be wanted."

"I have only some loose silver. You had better, if you please, lend me a sovereign ; for, of course, it is wise to be provided in case of an emergency. And ready money is always useful—not to say indispensable—upon occasion. Now, I think I must set out on my travels ; you shall see me again as speedily as may be."

"And I will remain quietly here. I am feeling much better for my comfortable sleep. Tell Queenie I will be down towards five o'clock. Fanny will bring me my luncheon. But, mother, there is one thing in particular that I wish to ask you."

"What is it, dear ?"

"Ought I not to decline, steadfastly, all offers of marriage ? Would it not be—well ! *a great mistake*, to share with another all the disgrace that must fall on the name of Derrington ?"

"I scarcely know how to answer, without mature consideration. But are such proposals to be expected ?"

"They have been made already. If I accepted, the advantages would be all on my side—the disadvantages on his."

"Just one word—I will not put another question. Do you really *care* ? Is your affection given to this suitor ?"

"Yes ; entirely so, and unchangeably. It is not an affair of yesterday."

"My dear, I believe I know your secret ; but, at present, at least, I think it is wisest withheld. There are circumstances under which it is inexpedient to explain. There occur crises in nearly all lives that must be met unaided ; there are times when one must seek counsel with oneself alone, and *with God*."

"But our family *is* disgraced, is it not ?"

"That has betided which we would fain have shunned at any cost. As a family we have been poor enough, especially in old days, but *respectable*. We have never been what the world calls well connected ; but now it has come to pass that my daughter, and your sister, has made a far from reputable alliance. But still, what is not our fault is not actually our shame ; and a woman, if blameless herself, takes *status* morally as well as socially with her husband.

Make no rash resolves, my Dolly ; perhaps a way will be opened ; it will be shown to you, by the Lord Himself, what your ultimate decision *ought* to be ; for, remember, a Christian woman owes something to her lover, as well as to his kith and kin, if he be unquestionably worthy of her."

"The worthier he, the more unworthy *she*, if she breathe a syllable that may induce him to commit a *mésalliance*—at least, it seems so to me. But I will try to leave it all just now, if I may ; as you observe, events may determine themselves ; and, after all, our lives are shaped for us—there are always guiding threads, if we have but the faith and the *courage* to see them for ourselves, and to lay hold on them. Good-bye, mother ; it always does me good to talk to you, and you always understand me."

And soon afterwards Mrs. Derrington took her departure, Mrs. Fairfax finding out some cogent reason for accompanying her as far as Euston Square. It would be an immense convenience to her to be driven there that morning ; and Queenie saw no reason why they should not go together, and the carriage would not be wanted elsewhere. Mrs. Derrington reached "China Place" about three o'clock, and found it desolate, and dreary, and old-world looking in the extreme—precisely as Dolly had described it.

But she was not readily admitted, as her daughter had been, and in vain she pulled at the iron ring and chain that was placed for the accommodation of visitors. A loud dissonant bell resounded audibly through the mouldy old house, but no further results ensued, or seemed likely to ensue. She might as well have tolled the bell of a shut-up church, on a desert island, for no one answered to the summons. There was no sign of life inside ; was it possible that Kitty had breathed her last, and was left by her custodians to sleep her final sleep in solitude ?

Then Mrs. Derrington grew quite desperate, and just a little wrathful ; and she began to pull at that rusty chain till the loud reverberations of the cracked bell roused all the echoes of silent "China Place." "If any one is alive in the house they *shall* hear !" she said to herself, grimly, as unceasingly she tugged with all her force at the rusty handle. At last, her perseverance was rewarded. Footsteps—rather

slipshod footsteps—were heard descending the stairs and crossing the wide flagged hall ; then several fastenings were withdrawn, and the door opened a little way, secured by the heavy chain-bolt that forbade the ingress or egress of any animal larger than a cat. But through the aperture peered the unwashed countenance of a most forbidding-looking elderly personage, who curtly inquired how any Christian woman could dare to make such a “hateful disturbance” while the missus was a-lying dying on her own bed ?

“I should have caused no disturbance had you shown any signs of answering the bell,” replied Mrs. Derrington, quietly. “I am Mrs. Chapman’s mother—her sister was here yesterday. I desire that you will conduct me immediately to her room.”

“I promised her that no one should be let in,” responded the hag, with a suspicious hiccough, that evidently impeded her utterance. “She’s too far gone to speak—let her alone to die in peace, there’s a good soul !”

To which Mrs. Derrington replied, “Open the door, this moment, or some one will be here to open it for you ! I must see my daughter without delay.”

Very sullenly the old woman replied, letting down the chain with a good deal of unnecessary clatter, and pushing, with some difficulty, the door wide open on the uneven flags. “She won’t know you—she’s past it ! It ain’t my fault if you will force your way in.”

She pointed to the stairs, and Mrs. Derrington hastened to ascend. On the landing stood another old woman, who began to cry aloud, “Thieves ! Thieves ! Policeman ! Policeman !” and she tried to impede the visitor’s further progress, but was evidently too much intoxicated to offer anything like successful opposition. She staggered aside with something between a moan and a cackle, and Mrs. Derrington proceeded towards a room, the door of which was left open. And here, on the hearse-like bedstead, heavily draped with faded curtains that had once, long ago, been pre-eminently handsome, lay poor Kitty, so much like a corpse that at the first glance her mother believed her to be dead.

But she still breathed, though almost inaudibly ; the

neglected bedclothes faintly rose and fell, and there was now and then a low gurgling sound, that might, indeed, be the awful "death-rattle," that tells that life's weariful journey is all but ended.

Mrs. Derrington sat down, raised the pillows of the dying woman, and tried to administer a little nourishment, for a basin of lukewarm gruel, well-flavoured with brandy, with the spoon in it, stood on the little table beside the bed. But Kitty was past swallowing, and as there was an emptied bottle of wine close at hand, she mingled some with water, and gently wet with the liquid the parched, colourless lips. It was all in vain, though there were a few hurried gasps, and the stiffening tongue tried to form an almost inarticulate word or two, and Mrs. Derrington thought she heard a sob-like whisper of "Fred! Dolly—*where?*" and then all was still; the pale eyelids fluttered, the thin, cold fingers moved convulsively on the dirty counterpane, and all was still. Kitty Chapman's misguided career was over; she slept the quiet sleep of Death.

For a few minutes the stepmother knelt by the still form, and wept bitterly. Had she failed in aught? she asked herself, all humbly; had she failed in duty to her husband's children, of whom she had taken the charge? Had she striven, to the best of her ability, to counteract the neglect of early years? She thought she had—she hoped she had—but then, Kitty and Nelly removed themselves so abruptly, so unceremoniously from her influence. But for that fatal, heedless marriage, all might have been well, or at least, comparatively well!

She could hear voices downstairs, but she shrank from summoning those coarse, vicious women to her assistance; she felt less alone with that silent clay than she would have been had they hastened to her presence. There were tokens of their odious "ministrations" on all sides; they had evidently ransacked the room and the adjoining lumber-closet as soon as their mistress became insensible; the wine and spirit decanters had been put under contribution pretty freely; and some of Kitty's best dresses and shawls, silks, velvets, and laces, were in process of being packed, prior to removal. Mrs. Derrington understood now why her appeals

for admission had been so long disregarded. There were but these two abandoned creatures, besides the dying woman, in the great empty house ; and they were partially intoxicated, and were, besides, aghast at the idea of being intruded on by they knew not whom. The wonder was that they had admitted any one, seeing that they had strong bars and bolts between them and the outside world. The only supposition that could be entertained was that the worthless women—servants, or guardians of any sort—had drunk themselves into so stupid a state that they were really incapable of defending their dishonest and dishonourable interests.

But what was to be done ? Mrs. Derrington, though far from a timid woman, absolutely quailed as she reviewed her strange position. Here she was, shut up in a dismal, solitary house, far from all aid ; alone with a corpse and with two unprincipled females, one of them in an advanced stage of intoxication, the other one very far from sober. Her dread of the situation in which she found herself increased every moment. A feeling of faintness stole over her ; she feared lest actual insensibility might follow, lest she, too, should be left to the mercy of these harpies, who might be sworn confederates of Stanger, Chapman, and Co., for all she really knew !

She left the chamber of death for the landing where she remembered that she had seen a window partially raised. Yes ; and it looked to the front of the house, and it was but a moment's work to throw it wide open, and let in the outer air. The cool wind revived her, and as her composure returned there flashed across her memory the recollection of long treasured words, that she seemed almost to have forgotten, so vividly they came back upon her mind, so specially they seemed to have been spoken for the lonely hour of need, when all human aid was far from her. "God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble,"—and her heart inly echoed, "therefore we will not fear."

Three minutes afterwards she was feeling quite collected, and asking herself what was to be her next step. She was so far from home, from friends—so far, as it seemed to her, from civilised humanity. Would those wretched women try

to prevent her leaving the house? Tipsy as they were, she could cope with them she felt sure; if they essayed to interfere with her, she would fight for her freedom; but she could not abandon poor dear Kitty, to whom the last decencies were due.

Just then the rickety garden-gate swung back on its broken hinges, and a stalwart youth, of eighteen or thereabouts, came whistling up the mossy path. Her resolution was taken instantly. She would not wait for the clanging of the bell, which might rouse the women to something like concerted action. She ran quickly and lightly downstairs, drew back the ponderous bolt, turned the huge key, and let fall the clanking chain.

"I've called to know," said the young man, "whether bread isn't wanted? I called the day before yesterday, and knocked and rang back and front, but could get no answer. They don't have much bread, but what they do have we supply; and mother said as how I'd better try again."

"I know nothing about the household arrangements," returned Mrs. Derrington. "I came to see my daughter not an hour ago, and I found her all but dead. It is over now; she died a few minutes after I arrived, and there is no one in the house except tipsy servants, of whom I know nothing. Can you tell me of any one likely to come to my assistance? Any respectable person who would help me for a while? Payment shall be made."

"Tipsy servants!" echoed the youth; "they don't call themselves common servants, I fancy! One says she is the sick lady's nurse; the other is the housekeeper, and has been here I don't know how long; but they're queer ones, both of 'em; and they never goes to church nor chapel—neither of 'em."

"Who is your mother? Would she come to me for an hour, do you think?"

"No! I don't think she could, 'cause she's got twins a fortnight old. I'm afraid I don't know anybody that would be of much use to you—unless you try our minister's wife!"

"Where shall I find her? For I will not go back into the house with these dreadful women."

"Just look you there, between them old apple-trees, and you'll see a chapel."

"I see a building, I saw it as I came in, and took it for a barn!"

"It isn't much better, for it's very old, and we are going to get a new one. Our minister, he is a Baptist, and his wife is a nice, kind woman. She's at the chapel now—'a-Dorcassing,' I think as it's called; she's sure to help you, if you go to her."

"I'll go this minute. Which is the best way?"

"Right through that orchard there—leastways, that was an orchard, once! But mind the nettles and the ditches, and there's an old clay-pit half full of muddy water, and most grown over with docks and briars. Then there's a sort of field, and there's something like a path across it. And then there's nothing between you and *Bethel*, 'cept a hundred or so yards of hobbling walking. It ain't half a mile that way—not more than a quarter, I reckon; and I know Mrs. Ridley 'll come! I'd go with you myself, only I'm bound to leave the bread at three houses lower down the road."

"Thank you. Wait one minute while I fetch my bonnet." And in a few seconds Mrs. Derrington was out of the house; the baker was on his way with his basket of loaves; and still there was no sign of the anti-teetotallers.

The orchard was easily crossed, and the various pitfalls avoided; the field came next, with its scanty pasture of weeds and coarse grass, on the remains of which had apparently descended, in years gone by, a tremendously heavy storm of broken brick-ends. Finally, "*Bethel*!" which looked more like a sanctuary and less like a barn the nearer it was approached. It seemed ancient enough to date from the time of the Puritans, and near it were two or three neglected mounds that were evidently graves.

As Mrs. Derrington drew nigh the open door, sounds of hymn-singing were audible. As she listened, she heard several uneducated female voices, singing—

"O God! our help in ages past,
Our hope for years to come;
Be Thou our guard while troubles last,
And our eternal home—"

and she felt cheered and comforted ; for undoubtedly there were Christian women close at hand. What a bond of communion was that slow rustic singing, and those sacred familiar words. "Thank the Lord for His Church," was the fervent thanksgiving that rose from Mrs. Derrington's anxious heart. Yes ; Dorcas work, or something of the kind, was going on ; it seemed to be a sort of mothers' meeting, combined with a very small sewing society ; and the minister, as well as the minister's wife, were both in the little vestry. In five minutes both had left the execution of their own work in the hands of the oldest mother, and were crossing the orchard on their way to China Place, and listening to Mrs. Derrington's sad story.

To her great relief she found the front door on the latch, as she had left it ; both women were fast asleep on the kitchen hearth. The minister went forth again to seek the nearest doctor, that no trouble might arise about proving the cause of death to be purely natural, and while he was away his wife and Mrs. Derrington performed the last eartherly services that poor Kitty would ever require, save funeral obsequies.

It seemed that "China Place" had borne a bad character for years ; it was credited with being the haunt of thieves and evil-disposed people for more than one generation. But the lease would be up very shortly ; and then the tumble-down old place, which had once been a respectable mansion—far from the haunts of men—would be levelled to the ground. Mrs. Derrington was thankful to discover that the name of "Chapman" had never transpired ; and Kitty, whom few people in the neighbourhood had seen, passed always for a widow, or else a forsaken wife. She was very careful not to mention her own name.

"Will you remain here for the night?" asked the minister's wife, when Kitty, decently arrayed for her burial, lay peacefully at rest. And Mrs. Derrington replied, "I think not ! I am sure not ! Nothing can hurt *her* now, and it is not my duty to protect the property and interests of my poor step-daughter's unprincipled husband. My best plan is to get back to my own home as speedily as possible, and leave all future arrangements to

Kitty's father. We must return together as soon as we can. We shall not interfere with our vagabond son-in-law's household—if it be, indeed, his!—for till yesterday not one of us had the least suspicion of the existence of China Place; my husband does not even now know anything about it. But we shall see that this poor clay is laid to rest in some decent 'God's acre.' The worthless women whose home this seems to be can stay or go just as they please. Our sole responsibility is these poor remains—nothing else is, or can be, any concern of ours. Thank you a thousand times for your great kindness. To-morrow, or next day, I will see you again, with Mr. ———, my husband; but be assured I shall never again count you or *your* husband as strangers, and you shall know all that we dare communicate of the unhappy history that ends—*here!* ”

And Mrs. Derrington laid her hand reverentially on the unheaving breast of the white-robed figure on the bed.

Rather more than an hour later, she had bidden “adieu” for the present to her Christian friends, and was nearing Clapham Common, where she had determined to be driven rather than to her own house at Brixton Hill. For she wished to take counsel with Dolly and with Mr. and Mrs. Osborne before she gave her husband the history of her sudden and mournful visit to “China Place.”

CHAPTER XXXIII.

THE LAST OF KITTY.

“**M**OTHER, dear! I am come to pay you a little visit.”

“You are welcome, my boy; I had almost concluded that you, for once, were gone to the City without making your usual *salaam*! Are you really going to take a holiday? Has anything happened?”

“A good deal has happened, of one sort or another—

over and above Miss Queenie's engagement. Prepare yourself for some surprises, Mrs. Osborne."

"Pleasant ones, I hope?"

"Well—yes. I will begin with the most important of the series: I trusted that I should be able to announce a second 'engagement,' within the twelve hours, but find it is not possible. Mother, I proposed to Dolly early this morning and was *not* accepted! Are you astonished?"

"Yes, and no, Philip. In some sense I have been expecting you to come to an explanation with Dolly ever since she came back from Paris; and I have asked myself, more than once, whether I really did the right thing by you, and by her, when, nearly twelve years ago, I took measures which must result in your being permanently thrown together. I adopted, as I supposed, another daughter, and not a daughter-in-law; I always intended that Dolly should be, in every particular, your real *sister*."

"Which I am very thankful to know she is not, and never can be. But, mother, I am a little disappointed! I came to you with so much confidence; I was not quite sure about my father, but I thought, I believed, *you* would be entirely on my side. I know you love Dolly, dearly."

"I love her very dearly, Philip, more dearly than I can tell; and if there were not certain obstacles in the way of such a union, I should most thankfully receive her as my son's *wife*. One sweeter, or more estimable, or in nearly every particular—I had almost said more *eligible*—more *suitable* I could not expect to welcome. But you were *not* accepted, you told me, or did I misunderstand?"

"I was not accepted; though I think I might have been had not things gone so perversely just at the juncture. And that brings me to my second piece of news, mother; Queenie's sapphires have come back again!"

"*Queenie's sapphires!* Are you sure, Philip? or have you only heard news of them?"

"They are in this house at this very moment; and they are in possession of their lawful owner. You shall see them presently!"

"But how did they come back to this house—to Queenie? Has Stanger been taken?"

"No ; and I should not be surprised if he escaped altogether. Mother, prepare to be startled ; I received them only this morning—several hours ago—from Dolly herself ! "

"From Dolly ? I cannot quite understand, Philip ; I am very stupid, I am afraid—I feel so confused ! I am not good at solving a mystery, you know. How did dear Dolly, of all people, come by the jewels ? "

"You know where she went yesterday ? "

"She had a letter very unexpectedly from her sister, Mrs. Chapman, and she went to her, did she not ? "

"She went, in fact, to receive the poor woman's dying confession, and the sapphires came from *her* ! They have been in her possession ever since that memorable Sunday evening, more than two years ago. They are just as they were when they were stolen—they have not been touched. But Stanger was the actual thief, and he was in collusion with Queenie's pretended maid—Susanna South."

"I always said that woman was an impostor ; I was not in the least surprised when she disappeared, together with the jewels and her accomplices. But, Philip, what had Kitty Chapman to do with these people ? If there is a story to tell, tell it at once, please ; I don't think I am strong enough to bear suspense."

"Mother, dearest, don't flurry yourself ; I will tell you all about it ; you shall know from beginning to end everything that transpired. Only understand, at the outset, that Dolly—our own Dolly—stands perfectly clear of all shadow of blame ; she has been made the unwitting instrument of restoring the jewels, that is all. But I will begin the miserable story—I see you are anxious to hear it, mother."

"Yes, for manifold reasons ; I am stupid, and cannot quickly grasp facts, though they may be obvious ; and I am nervous—childishly, ridiculously nervous. My dear Dolly ! I am afraid she has suffered. She looked very poorly last night, and seemed strangely silent and reserved ; I should have gone to her room to talk to her before bedtime had not Mr. Howard compelled all my attention. Now then, my son, what has really and truly happened ? "

And Philip, as he had promised, commenced with Mrs.

Paterson's communication of several weeks back, telling the whole story of Dolly's awakened, or rather reawakened, suspicions, and of her yesterday's visit to Camden New Town, and all that passed at China Place prior to her return to Clapham, with the jewels in her possession. And then he continued : " I had meant to speak to her last night ; I saw no good reason why the two betrothals should not be celebrated simultaneously ; but Dolly would say nothing to the point ; she declared that she had borne as much as she could bear for that time, and that she would speak with me—conclusively—early this morning. She came into the old schoolroom—where she generally writes letters and transacts her own business, you know !—with the sapphires in question—to my intense astonishment. And then, of course, it was that I heard the true and full history of their concealment. She would not hear a word of what I had to plead, mother. I protested in vain against her decision, which was decided never to link her fate with mine, or with that of any honourable man ! "

" I cannot wonder ; oh, my poor Dolly ! "

" But, mother, *ought* she to be sacrificed ? Ought she to be allowed to sacrifice herself to such unhappy scruples ? Why should she—why should Annie, or any of the family, be victims to the criminal misconduct of the rest ? "

" Philip, my dear, I should like to answer as you would wish ; but I hesitate, because your father will have to be consulted. Your elder brothers, also, may have something to say. "

" My elder brothers may say what they will ; it is my father's right that he should be consulted ; but I claim my own right to choose for myself, and only for myself, the woman who is to share my life. There can be no objection to Dolly, personally ? "

" None whatever ; though I know your father has some settled and rather stringent views on the subject. "

" My father should never have placed us, then, in a position which it was possible might become some day equivocal ; we were brought up together, and on sisterly and brotherly terms ; but we always *knew* there was no such actual connection. I have thought of Dolly, *not* as of a

sister, ever since she was about fifteen. Almost unconsciously to myself, I have been her lover for years ; I only wonder I did not speak and lay my fortunes, such as they were, at her feet before she left us for the *Maison d'Or*. Mother, after nearly five years' constancy ; after the knowledge of what Dolly Derrington really is, in every respect—as daughter, sister, and friend—you cannot surely expect me to dismiss the hope I have cherished so long ? It is only now I am asked to resign the dream, on whose fulfilment so much depends, that I begin to realise *all* that I am called to forego. No other woman in the world will ever be to me what she is ! I shall never find another Dolores, mother ; you cannot possibly, and in your heart, object to the match.”

“No, I cannot, and do not, Philip. Except that she is not actually of my own flesh and blood, she is as my own—my very own child ! I have had much to do with the forming of her mind and character, and I have trained her, or very largely so, in the way it best pleased me she should go. She is really and truly a Christian girl—she is of my own communion ; she loves what I love, she dislikes what I dislike, there is perfect harmony between us. Rarely is it given to true mother and daughter to be so wholly one at heart ; the one woman-child I have borne—darling that she is !—is not to me the *second self* that Dolores is. It is really wonderful ; I have sometimes felt that it was a little short of miraculous, our perfect union in soul and spirit, our identity in thought and feeling, our living together, as it were, *of one accord*. There is scarcely a point on which we differ ; I, at least, know of none !”

“My purpose to make Dolly my wife is strengthened with every word you utter. A man, if he be blessed with a mother such as mine, thinks there is not her equal in the whole world. You are not only my father's wedded wife, and therefore the mother of his offspring, but you would be, were it possible, the mother *of my choice* ! Is it not, then, perfectly natural that I should select, as my own for life, the one woman on earth who closely resembles her—whom she has sedulously modelled on her own pattern ? Ah, you must know that 'it would be good, passing good, for me to take Dolly to wife. Bless us both as *one* !”

"I do bless you both, my dear boy; and if it were not——"

"Nay, mother, no *ifs* ! There is no real barrier between us—none of any kind. The only obstacle that could possibly be alleged is the very undesirable character of some of poor Dolly's blood relations. But they actually severed themselves from her long, long ago—those, at least, who are unworthy of her. The Derrington family, though not our equal in station, are really as good as we are, except this miserable Mrs. Chapman, and, perhaps, Mrs. Hancox, who have simply gone the way of worldly women, and identified themselves with their unprincipled, vagabond husbands."

"Mr. Derrington is not exactly the sort of man with whom my son ought to be connected."

"He is a weak man; certainly not at all wise or clever. He is what folks call a luckless, ne'er-do-well mortal! Though however he managed to secure two such superior women as Mrs. Derrington and Dolly's own mother must have been, is more than I can fathom. And though I have known Richard Derrington my whole life, or known about him, I never heard anything to the disparagement of his moral character. He is not credited with breaking any of the Commandments; he is not a wine-bibber, or extortionate, or anything that the Bible denounces. He is only an unthrifty, unbusiness-like man, whom both James and John countenance, because of his long service and of his unblemished reputation."

"I am afraid James and John, and perhaps Oliver, will make their protest against any closer connection with the Derrington family."

"Then, let them! they are not asked to marry Dick Derrington's daughter. Indeed, I think the best way would be to pension off the poor fellow; I am not at all sure that it will comport with my dignity to have my wife's father receiving a monthly or quarterly stipend at the hands of the cashier in Laurence Pountney Lane. After all, there are very few girls, I fancy, with whose entire family one would care to be identified. And when this wretched affair is over, Chapman's name need never be mentioned again."

Kitty will die, and there will be the end of it ; for we are not obliged to prosecute this rascal, who is no one knows where."

"And happily there are no children to complicate difficulties. The next sister, Mrs. Hancox, has little ones, I am pretty certain ; but Dolly and she have never met since their parting in this house, twelve years back. Maggie and Jennie have both boys and girls ; but they are reputable women, though in humble circumstances ; and they are married to honest men."

"That is quite enough for me ; I shall never be ashamed of such. We are not grand people ourselves ; for my part, I have not any intention of setting up a pedigree—we have no very remarkable ancestors to quote ; though it is surely a cause for thankfulness that we have none of whom there is any need to be ashamed. I do think, mother, we are not so very unequal—we and the Derringtons !—that is, if we put the two black sheep out of the question, and 'black sheep,' as we know too well, are not as rare as they might be, even in genteel society. I dare say, if the truth were known, we Osbornes might not have been absolutely immaculate—as a race, at least—two or three generations ago. But, mother, to come to the point itself, I can perceive that you really agree with me, and are quite ready to be talked over—if, indeed, you want any talking over at all ! Say you will be on my side—promise me."

"I cannot make promises, dear ; for I could never pledge myself to join the opposition party, even in favour of my own son. I must stand always by your father, and yet I think I may promise one thing—I will never go against you ; my influence, such as it is, shall be with you, rather than the reverse. If I cannot, and must not, take sides, I can be to a large extent—*neutral*."

"And that, I suppose, must content me. It is an unspeakable comfort to me to be quite sure that, apart from circumstances, you approve absolutely of my choice. Ah ! if only I could persuade my Dolly to give me ever so indefinite a pledge, to hold out ever so faint a hope, I could be content to wait—for years, if need were."

"In any case it will be an affair of waiting, I think."

"Never mind that, we shall be the better able to prove each other. And this I know, if my father do not actually disapprove, he will do something for me; I should like to take a few upward steps in my profession."

For Philip, after all, had embraced, not medicine, but law, and had just commenced to practise as a barrister.

"And, of course, Dolly will not come to you portionless! Her dowry has been a settled thing from the very first. When we took her for our own child your father and I talked over the matter very seriously, and it was arranged that in any event she was to be comfortably provided for. But there is just one thing to be thought of, Philip, and that requires some consideration—till full consent is given, till the reigning powers that be decisively ratify the engagement, you are placing Dolly in rather an awkward position. You cannot behave towards each other as affianced lovers, you cannot even pretend to be indifferent."

"There is some little difficulty, I must confess; I thought of that even as Dolly refused to listen to my suit. But I felt that I must speak to you, mother, if it were only for Dolly's sake. Tell me, now, what course do you advise?"

"I think I advise—for the present, that is—an entire suspension of the affair. Be content to be passive; let this untoward business of the Chapmans blow over; Dolly must have other things than love and courtship to think of just now; and you say Kitty is actually dying?"

"Dolly believes that she cannot survive, and it is best that such should be the case, I think. You see the poor woman's death relieves us of a host of difficulties, for with the very best and kindest intentions I can perceive that we have no right to condone the affair. We must take some steps. We cannot, as Christian citizens, allow a gang of seemingly genteel thieves to go about the world unchecked and unpunished when it lies with ourselves to restrain their evil courses. It makes us, indeed, to aid and abet their malpractices. Justice *must* take its course."

"I suppose so; nor do I see any reason why Fred Chapman, apart from his wife, should be leniently considered. But all this while, where is Dolly?"

"She is still in bed, and Mrs. Derrington is with her."

The poor girl has had a very trying time; she has refused to see any one, except her step-mother, whom I know she summoned by letter last night. And I think—indeed, I am pretty certain—that Mrs. Derrington is going on, almost immediately, to Camden Town. And that reminds me, mother, I have—in your name, of course, and with Queenie's full consent—placed the carriage at her disposal. It is a weary, long journey to the further end of this *terra incognita*. It was almost too much for Dolly yesterday, even if current events had not thoroughly upset her."

"You did quite right to offer the carriage. It is such a long round to take the North London rail for us who are well in the South."

"I am not sure, though, that she will take it, for she thought a public conveyance would excite less attention in such a neighbourhood as Dolly described. This 'New Town,' if I understand it rightly, is quite beyond the limits of Camden Town, as we knew it a few years ago."

"Has Mrs. Derrington gone?"

"I do not know; but she meant to lose as little time as possible. It is a good while since she went up to Dolly's room. Should you like to speak with her, mother?"

"Yes, I would like to have a little talk with her before she leaves the house. I want to know if Dolly is really unwell; if she needs any special attention. But I shall keep your secret, my son, unless she be already in Dolly's confidence."

In less than a quarter of an hour Philip came back to his mother's room; Mrs. Derrington was gone, and with her Mrs. Fairfax, who had been seized with a sudden desire to pay a visit to her son's family in the immediate neighbourhood of Euston Square. The carriage came back, without Mrs. Fairfax; and the coachman reported that he had set down Mrs. Derrington, not far from the Railway Station.

Mrs. Osborne came down in time for luncheon; and the celebrated "star sapphires" were exhibited, as if they had never been inspected before. Queenie was wonderfully elate, and in the highest possible spirits. "Frank is coming to dinner," she said, confidentially to her mother, though no one else was in the room. "It will be quite

a sensation, will it not? to show him these lovely jewels, which he saw for the first time and, as we feared, for the last, on the evening of the ball. I have a great mind to wear them to-night—to come down to dinner in them; what do you say?”

“I think you had better forego the pleasure, and be content to display them to Frank when he comes. Remember, the sight of them must be excessively painful to Dolly; it will certainly be a shock to her, if you appear in them, just as if they had never been missing—as if nothing remarkable had happened.”

“Of course, it must be horrible to know that one’s sister is actually a thief, and Mrs. Chapman is really that, you know, although she was not present when the robbery was effected. But if Dolly must have a shock, I should say she had better sustain it, and have it over. She will have to see the jewels again, and again; so, as well to-night as presently; and I do think Frank would like to see me again as he saw me when he opened the ball with me on that memorable night. Ah! how little I thought then of his being my lover—my promised husband; but it all seems to have come about so simply and naturally—even the restoration of the sapphires seems quite a matter of course. Oh, mammie, dear, I *must* wear them; I think it will be such a happiness to put them on once more. Do let me have the exquisite pleasure of seeing Frank’s start of surprise when he catches sight of their unsurpassed lustre.”

“Queenie, unless you wish to grieve me sorely, you will consent to put off the desired exhibition. Show them to Frank, by all means; he has every right to a very early sight of them. And you must tell the tale of their recovery precisely as you please; that is, if you do not prefer that your father, or your brother, should tell it for you. You could scarcely give the full story if Dolly were present.”

“Well, I suppose I could not; but I do not understand why Dolly should be made such a fuss about. It is her misfortune, of course, not her fault, to be so disagreeably connected. And it is not as though she had taken my sapphires herself!”

“My dear, cannot you comprehend that to a person of

dear Dolly's high principle and susceptibilities, the connection itself must be a source of extreme pain? She has had very little to do with this unhappy sister; but she would be keenly wounded, I am sure, if she heard you speaking of the sad affair so lightly."

"One would think I had stolen my own jewels, to hear you speak so reproachfully, mother. I might be the criminal myself—or Dolly, even—rather than that deceitful, thievish Mrs. Chapman, who, I am afraid, will not have her deserts; for a long term of penal servitude is what she *ought* to get!"

"My dear, do not speak harshly of the poor woman; neither you nor I know what her temptations were; and she is dying—remember that. To one in her condition, one should be very merciful; there may be extenuating circumstances of which we know nothing. And she never wore these sapphires, recollect; they have come back again, none at all the worse for their detention."

"Well, mother! I won't be severe. I am too happy to feel more than a passing anger against the robbers who planned and executed the robbery so cleverly. Yes; I can afford to be perfectly generous. I can forgive Dolly entirely."

"Dolly does not need your forgiveness, Queenie; she is not even remotely in fault. Your loss is more traceable to yourself; you were certainly to blame, she was not! You have only to thank Dolly, through whom the jewels are returned."

Queenie's brow grew dark, and she clenched her dimpled little hand in passion.

"That is unkind of you, mother," she said, "to remind me of the days of my humiliation! I was only a girl then—I am not much more now; but then I was little more than a child, and was easily deceived by such characters as the pretended Count, and that treacherous Susanna. I should know far better *now*. I understand, as well as if I were an elderly woman, that all is not gold that glitters. I can appreciate a character like Frank's, *now*. I am supremely happy in my engagement, and it is most ungenerous of you to remind me of the follies of the past."

"I did not intend to be ungenerous, child, but I cannot help saying that it is rather yourself you should speak of forgiving than Dolly, who from first to last was sinless. You know, dear, you were *crazy*—ridiculously crazy—about that bad man, who wanted your wealth and not yourself; even your beautiful face was as nothing to him compared with the pearls and sapphires he was determined to make his own. Ah, Queenie, my child, be not over-confident; think sometimes of the episode of the *Almanach de Gotha*!"

"Mother, you are more than cruel to recall to my memory that unhappy event—that miserable book which I have hated with all my heart ever since. And now, when I have quite banished all thought of that dreadful, false Stanger—when I am honourably engaged to Frank Howard, you bring up the hateful mistake again. You would never have spoken to Dolly as you have spoken to me, I am certain; I wish she had been the victim, and not I; I am almost tired of being taunted with the virtues of so good a person as she is."

"Nay, my dear," said Chrissie, almost tearfully, "I have never taunted you—never dreamed, even, of comparing your virtues or mistakes. I only maintain that what fault there is lies with yourself, and not with poor Dolly. But we will say no more about it; if you have sinned, you have also suffered punishment, and now all is over, as far as you are concerned. But, be very gentle—be humble, my Queenie, and be not too hard upon the erring."

Queenie wept profusely over her "hurt feelings," but she had time to dry her eyes and regain her serenest composure before her lover arrived at "The Acacias," about half-an-hour before dinner. And Frank brought with him the "engagement ring," which he had had by him for some weeks, but which, unluckily, was *not* in his waistcoat-pocket on the evening when it was really wanted! for Frank Howard had had to screw up his courage to the utmost pitch before he could resolve to utter the words upon which so much depended.

The ring was on now, however; it sparkled on the slender, white finger; and Queenie, well pleased, could proclaim herself to the world as a *fiancée*. She did not

wear the sapphires ; after all that had passed that afternoon between herself and her mother she could not, she told herself ; but she contented herself with showing them, and narrating the marvellous story of their re-appearance, without, however, connecting the names of Kitty and Dolly, which was easy enough, as Frank knew nothing about the Derrington family, and had never seen any other sister than Annie. She might have indulged the whim, though, as far as regarded Dolores, for she did not make her appearance at dinner ; and Mrs. Osborne announced, as they all sat down, that Dolly was seriously unwell, and needed perfect quiet. Mrs. Derrington had returned from Camden Town, having closed the eyes of her unfortunate step-daughter, and the two were dining together in the old schoolroom, where they would be undisturbed ; and it was understood that Mrs. Derrington would be glad to have a little private conversation with Mr. Osborne or with Philip before she left for Brixton. Her husband, of course, was still in profound ignorance of all that had occurred at China Place, for he had left home betimes that morning, just before the delivery of Dolly's missive, so knew nothing whatever about Kitty's deserted condition, nor of her hopeless state, nor of the terrible suspicions which had arisen concerning her complicity with the people whom he was accustomed to designate "Messrs. Stanger and Co." He had not the smallest conception of any intimacy existing—still less any actual alliance—between the *pseudo* Count and his daughter's husband, who got his living, as he supposed, by card-sharpping, dishonourable betting, and shady practices generally.

Mrs. Derrington did not quit "The Acacias" till she had been assured, over and over again, that Kitty's name should not publicly transpire. Mr. Chapman was to be found and dealt with ; but no actual proceedings were to be taken against him, on the understanding that he should at once leave the country and pledge himself to return no more, on pain of being denounced to the authorities at Scotland Yard, who knew him under half-a-dozen aliases, and would certainly hesitate not at all to hunt him down and deliver him to condign punishment.

"But the Count," continued Jonathan Osborne, "the Count shall be brought to justice—if possible. I owe it as a solemn duty to my fellow-creatures to free them, as far as in me lies, from the exercise of that villain's consummate cleverness. His talent for fraud of every description amounts to genius. He makes a fine art, a science, of vulgar *kleptomania*! But I suppose, in his case, it is a question of 'diamond cut diamond'; as the old cookery-book says, or is supposed to say, 'First catch your hare!' It will be time enough to consider his punishment when he is in the hands of the police."

"I am quite indifferent to the fate of Stanger," returned Mrs. Derrington, "only I believe it will be a real blessing and a boon to honest men when he is sentenced for life to penal servitude. He is a sort of modern Dick Turpin, a fashionable Jack Sheppard; the only apprehension will be of the revelations and the plausible statement he may choose to make, if he find himself hopelessly beset."

"He is a veritable *Proteus*," quoth Philip. "He reminds one of the legends of antiquity, which permitted to *quasi* heroes the privilege of changing form, and even substance, at pleasure. But his day will come, notwithstanding! It may be that the Lord Himself will interpose, and say, 'Thus far shalt thou go and no farther.' But I have been wanting to ask you, Mrs. Derrington, can we not assist you in making such arrangements as will have to be made at Camden New Town?"

"No, thank you, Mr. Philip. I thank you gratefully, for my husband as well as for myself. But all that has to be done can be done by ourselves. I must talk to Mr. Derrington before anything can be determined; but I think I see my way to the fulfilment of all decencies. As for the house itself, it seems to me to belong to no one in particular, though poor Kitty was its nominal mistress. Tomorrow, my husband and I will go over to China Place together, and take our last look at the hapless child; we shall ascertain then what is actually required. I think we have simply to lay Kitty in her quiet grave, and leave all that is left in the house to the mercy of those who, wrongly or rightfully, bear rule therein. It is no duty of ours to

guard the property of our unworthy son-in-law—we do not even know whether it is really his. Of course, all that the poor departed one leaves behind her is *his*. We—her father and I—lay no claim—would not if we could lay any—to such property as remains. When our unfortunate child is committed ‘dust to dust,’ when the sod lies on her nameless grave, we shall wash our hands of China Place, for evermore.”

And so the plans for Kitty’s funeral were duly carried out. Mrs. Derrington and her husband did go next day to Camden New Town, and found China Place empty of all, save one of the tipsy old women, who declared that she had not the smallest objection to remain alone and “watch the corpse” of the “poor, dear, dead lady!” She was not afraid of the dead, she added; she knew how to keep her spirits up, lonely as the place was; and she had promised Mr. Chapman, when he went away, to look after his wife, who had been ailing for months and months, and to keep the house in order till he came back from foreign parts—which, “it might be, any day or any hour.”

“Where is Mr. Chapman now?” asked Mr. Derrington, who, after one last look at his dead daughter, inclined his ear to the half inarticulate gabble of the frowsy beldam.

“That’s more than I can tell you, sir,” replied the old woman; “he didn’t tell *me* where he was agoing, when he packed up his traps and went. I s’pose he told his lady wife; but she’s gone where people don’t tell no lies, nor no tales, neither. It was to Ameriky, I think, or Australiar, or West Indies, or the Poles, or somewheres. The Lord knows where!”

“I suppose the Lord does know, for He knows all things,” responded Mrs. Derrington; “but I am afraid the devil is very much in Mr. Chapman’s confidence.”

“Lors, don’t speak of the old gentleman, with the dead woman lying there, afore your very face. It aint lucky to mention *him*, with a corpse in the house; one never knows what may happen. Now, when is the funeral to be? You’ll be at all expenses, mister, won’t you?”

“I will pay all necessary expenses, certainly,” said Derrington, gravely; “and I think we agreed the funeral should be the day after to-morrow, did we not, Martha?”

"Yes," replied Martha; "if we can make all necessary arrangements. Richard, I think our best way will be to go and see the minister I told you of. If the poor child can be carried to the little chapel-yard I saw yesterday, it will simplify matters very much; and Mr. Ridley spoke to me of an undertaker who would do all that was needed, and not make any superfluous charge."

"There is not much left in the house to make a meal with!" interposed the "Nurse," as she insisted on being called; "for Nurse Jinks is my name," she informed the Derringtons; "and I likes to be called by my proper name! I was born a Filkins, and christened Mary Ann, at St. Pankridge's Church; and I married Solomon Jinks, as went to Heaven nigh upon twenty years ago, and left me a desolate widder."

"Get what is wanted," interrupted Mrs. Derrington, rather imprudently; "there will not be much required. I suppose the bearers will look for some refreshment; there must be bread and cheese."

"Bread and cheese!" exclaimed Nurse Jinks. "Why, there must—anyways there *should*—be a good piece of ribs of beef; or, perhaps, as it's summer weather, we had better say a fore-quarter of lamb and mint sauce and green peas, and a ham, and then a nice bit of cheddar, as would come in with the lettuces, as is a running to seed in the garding; and we must order in a barrel of good, sound ale, and let it be on the tap, for in course, Madam and Sir, being the poor lady's 'Pa and Ma,' you'd wish to do the thing handsome?"

"I will do the thing respectably—that is all," replied Mr. Derrington, shortly. "I'll undertake to find some honest men who will carry the poor thing to her last home; and when they come back from the chapel-yard they shall have as much bread and cheese as they can eat, and a pint a piece of XX. from the public house. But are there not a few bottles of wine in the house?"

"There may be a few dregs of cheap port; and there's some brandy we got for the poor soul that's gone, that I've never been paid for. Indeed, both me and the house-keeper 'll be sadly out of pocket by the job, I reckon."

"Where is the person you call the housekeeper?"

"Gone to St. Paul's Churchyard, to get herself decent mourning; she won't come back to-night, I should say. And won't there be a hearse, and plumes, and a good oak coffin?"

"Neither hearse nor plumes, if the distance to the chapel be no further than I suppose. All the rest can be left to Mrs.——, my wife and myself. We are going now to the minister, and we will see the undertaker he recommends. Have some bread in, and a good cheese; you need not trouble yourself about anything else. We will let you know how matters are settled before we return to London."

Mrs. Jinks was infinitely disgusted; she was evidently going to be cheated out of the "jolly spread" she had promised herself on the day of the funeral; but she comforted herself by the reflection that there were good pickings still in the almost empty house which could be judiciously appropriated and would not have to be accounted for. Mr. and Mrs. Derrington went away to the lonely Chapel House, as the residence of the minister and his wife was called; and after some quiet conversation with the worthy couple, and an interview with a decent undertaker, who agreed to have all in perfect readiness at the time appointed, and a parting visit to the house of death—where Nurse Jinks was consoling herself with some liquid that smelt suspiciously like hot gin-and-water—they went back to their home at Brixton Hill.

On the morning arranged they returned, meeting by appointment at China Place both minister and undertaker; and poor Kitty was carried to her grave in the ancient Puritan burying-ground, where it was believed that some of Cromwell's troopers lay at rest; and the bearers were modestly refreshed when all was over. And then, asking no further questions of Mrs. Jinks and her coadjutor, who failed to put in an appearance, Richard Derrington and Martha, his wife, "washed their hands" of China Place, which they never saw again; as in less than a year's time its long lease had fallen in, and it very speedily vanished from the neighbourhood.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

WEDDING PRESENTS.

IT was some weeks before Dolores Derrington was herself again. Philip, by his mother's advice, refrained from all lover-like demonstrations, and life at "The Acacias"—so far, at least, as these two young people were concerned—seemed to progress in the ordinary way. Queenie took it for granted that the idea which her brother had at one time cherished was permanently laid aside. Dolly and he were brother and sister again; for, of course, it would never do for her father's son and her own near relation to connect himself with a family on whose good repute so dark a shadow had fallen. And yet she wondered what would be their relations after she herself was married—and she was occupied already in making her preparations. She hoped her father and mother would never forget what was due to their long-established position. She hoped the elder brothers would never agree to receive Dolly into their midst but as their adopted sister, as she had been for so many years. She hoped, too, that all would remember what was due to *her* as Mrs. Frank Howard, *née* Osborne.

Kitty was buried in the old chapel-yard—which used to be, and perhaps still exists, among the wilderness of houses that now crowd that once solitary neighbourhood—in July. And some months afterwards it was discovered that, after all, there was a plain stone upon her grave, on which was inscribed only "Kitty," without any reference to her own or to her husband's family, and the date of the day of her death, and her age—which was only thirty-three! And Fred Chapman, who, under another name, kept up a regular correspondence with some trusted friends in the old vicinity, thought that he could do no better than take the advice which was tendered to him, and remove himself, and such property as he could realise, to the Antipodes.

He never returned to England, but settled in a flourishing Australian colony, where he conducted himself with so much

circumspection as to pass for a person of undoubted respectability ; and he did so well in a new and not dishonest course of life, that Mr. and Mrs. Hancox, who were greatly disheartened by Fred's failure in his own country, made up their minds to join him in the Colonies, and commence for themselves an unblemished career. Oddly enough, and not by any means to Queenie's chagrin, "Count Stanger" was not arrested ; though *how* he managed to elude pursuit, time after time, some of the most efficient members of the police force were puzzled to determine. He was *all but* captured on several occasions. There was evidence against him, the baffled officials declared, to do everything *but* hang him. Still he always slipped through their fingers, and escaped, over and over again, as it was frequently observed, "by the skin of his teeth only !"

Less and less was heard of him in the Mother Country, although at intervals he crossed the Atlantic and distinguished himself by some brilliant exploit, which, curiously enough, never failed to be successful. He had a perfect genius, the police affirmed, for scenting out valuables, and "appropriating" costly jewels, and on each occasion he assumed a different character, posing sometimes as a foreign nobleman ; sometimes as a godly dissenting minister ; sometimes as a barrister-at-law ; and once as a Colonial Bishop, the name of whose diocese exercised the memory of a good many professedly religious people. This white-haired, venerable-looking dignitary excited a great deal of attention in certain circles, and his visit to England was for the express purpose of collecting a fund for a mission to the Hulabaloo Islanders ; and they hung out somewhere in the South Seas, latitude and longitude differing considerably according to circumstances, and according to the impulse of the hour. The very reverend gentleman went so far as to deliver a telling speech at Exeter Hall, which, however, was affirmed to consist of an excess of startling anecdotes, and a good deal of extremely contradictory information. On the whole, Exeter Hall did not extend, as perhaps it might have done, the right hand of fellowship ; and it hung back while the collection was being made.

That appearance on the platform of Exeter Hall was the

last made before the English public. "Count Stanger," *alias* the Rev. Jonas Mowler, *alias* Mr. Duckitt, the celebrated legal counsel, *alias* the venerable Bishop of the Hullabaloo Islands, and perhaps a few more *aliases*, came to the conclusion that he had performed the *rôle* a little too often on this side of the sea. He caught sight of a face or two at Exeter Hall that reminded him unpleasantly of Scotland Yard; and he knew that there were rumours—"unfounded, of course!"—as to the truth of the reports issued at the meetings, and unwelcome investigations were being made as to the exact "latitude and longitude" of that benighted diocese of his, in the southern, or northern, or western, or otherwise seas! So he shook the dust off his feet, as a testimony against Exeter Hall, and turned his back upon it for ever; another week and he would have exchanged the platform and the committee rooms of that time-honoured institution in the Strand for the nearest police-court; so he wisely resolved to return to America, and end his life there, as a good citizen of New York, or Chicago, or Philadelphia, or Toronto, or any other place that seemed likely to suit his constitution.

So, once more, the *pseudo* Count and Bishop crossed the restless wave, and pitched his tent, where it best suited his purpose, in the United States; but his career was almost at its close! Late one "fall" he set off to join some particular friends of his, who had appointed the *rendezvous* of a very particular "Convention" somewhere in the Yosemite Valley—or, failing the region of "Big Trees," the Golden Gate itself. And *Sophie*—whom we shall better recognise under her old name of "Susanna South"—accompanied him.

Now, Adolphe and Sophie were by no means as young as they had been when first they were introduced to us; and their careers had been far from uneventful throughout the "rolling years"—for in order to dismiss for once and always this admirable couple, who played so large a part in the history of the Osbornes and the Derringtons, we have considerably anticipated the course of events. Neither of these ingenious people were at all strong! They had sustained many shocks, and suffered many keen anxieties, over and above the wearing state of excitement incidental

to hair-breadth escapes and fly-by-night travel, such as this much-enduring pair were at any moment liable to encounter. Instead of taking the inevitable railway-journey—after the rapid fashion of nineteenth century go-ahead Americans—Adolphe and Sophie—for brevity's sake we refer to them by their baptismal names, which they always averred were really and truly their own, independently of any *alias*—determined not to “book-through,” as we at home would say, but rather to make a sort of “trip” of the expedition ; which, nevertheless, meant *business*—and that of no ordinary description—and after thirty-six or forty-eight hours' travel, halt and take their rest and pleasure wherever it seemed most expedient.

The good train had gone steadily, though by no means too swiftly, on its journey for several days, when one evening, wayworn and tired, “Mr. and Mrs. Christopher Geary”—for that was their latest *alias*—alighted at the station agreed upon, and took their way to the solitary hotel, which was a monster affair, erected in the hope of being called, very shortly, to accommodate almost any number of travellers. It was a hotel of so many stories, that we decline to say *how many* ! And for reasons which never were explained, which nobody cared to explain, the guests, at that particular period, were landed on the sixth or seventh, or it might have been, the eleventh *stage*, even—we know not ! Of course, the guests went up in a *lift*, or “elevator.” Americans make it a rule to economise their forces as well as their time, and consequently get through a great deal more than we slow-going people of the old country. And up—up—up went Adolphe and Sophie on the final evening of their not too reputable lives.

There is no story to record of their last hours in this world ; all we know is that they went up in that convenient lift, and never came down again. For next morning, when the sun rose over the adjacent mountains, there was no lift of any kind left in the “Grand Columbian Hotel.” There were no stairs, either ; no flats, no corridors, no anything ! The entire building, lofty and imposing as it was, was burnt almost to the basement story, leaving only the bare foundations when the mass of ruins was cleared away.

How it happened no one ever knew ; though it was generally supposed that the awful fire had its origin *au troisième*, or else *au quatrième*. It mattered very little where the conflagration began, for only those on the lowest occupied floors managed to escape ; of the two or three highest nothing whatever remained ; only a few calcined bones, past all identification, being left to tell that under that gilded, lofty roof human life had been.

It was a very lonely spot, in spite of this immense provision that had been made for possible crowds of travellers, and the local fire-brigade was by no means in full force,—the necessary hose, and hydrants, and all other appliances being sadly wanting, and, of course there was no fire-escape that could be of the slightest use ; and, to make matters worse, the flames had obtained such a hold that neither lift nor staircases were in the least available to those unfortunates in the topmost landings, who were all, too late, awakened to their hideous danger.

The “Hotel Books,” being on the ground-floor, were quite easily saved, and were not even scorched ; a few other things, too, were snatched from the general wreck ; but of all the guests who were registered that night by the hall-porter, not one survived to tell the awful tale. Happily, not more than half-a-dozen names were down on the list, the last of these being “Mr. and Mrs. Christopher Geary, of New York.” Thus ended the unlovely story of Adolphe Friedrich and Sophie Mariette, his wife, who played the part of criminal “help-meet” all through her unscrupulous, unprincipled married history.

Dolly and Annie had attended to that little matter of the head-stone ; and for some years afterwards, both visited annually, in the month of July, the grave that covered the mortal remains of their most ill-fated and misguided sister. And except on these special occasions Kitty’s name was seldom mentioned by any member of her own family ; by the Osbornes never. Dolly and Annie together made this yearly pilgrimage, till the little chapel was pulled down, and the ancient burial ground officially closed, and turned into a trim secluded garden, that was very seldom entered. Maggie and Jennie knew only that she slept in an old

Puritan graveyard, of which most people were ignorant, shut up as it was between streets and rows of houses, in one of the new and fast overgrowing districts of North London.

But Dolly's health gave way all through the autumn that followed that eventful summer ; and in September, Chrissie arranged that she should accompany Mrs. Herbert Osborne to Tenby, and stay on there for a prolonged period. And Dolly and Alice Osborne stopped quietly at Mignonette Villa till Christmas was, once more, very near at hand.

Queenie's marriage had not yet taken place ; for Mr. Osborne—partly, perhaps, because he had asserted that he *could* be firm, even when his darling daughter opposed—had decreed that the engagement should be continued through a whole year, in order that the young people should have every opportunity of knowing each other thoroughly, and of being quite sure they had made no sort of blunder.

"But one gets tired of being 'engaged' so long," pouted Queenie, when, at the instance of Frank Howard, she made the request that the marriage should not be longer deferred. "And one feels so fettered, you know, daddy, when one can only dance with one person, and feel restricted in the matter of bouquets."

"If that is all," replied Mr. Osborne, "I am quite sure Frank will never object to your dancing with any respectable person, though, I know, he does not honestly approve of round dances ; he objects, and not at all unreasonably, to seeing his own betrothed whirled round in the arms of any other man."

"Then he should learn to waltz himself. Who cares for mere square dances ? I hate quadrilles, they are so stupid, and they tire one so."

"I should say 'round dances,' as you call those teetotum things, tire you so much more than quadrilles. Your lungs are sound enough, I know, and your heart is all right ; but you get out of breath, and I should think sometimes you are really giddy. And if Frank does not care for spinning about, neither should you ! You should begin to make up your mind, my dear, to like what your husband likes."

"Time enough when he is my husband ! At present he is my *lover* ; and a girl ought to make the very best of her

opportunity while it lasts. Lovers and husbands are not quite the same sort of cattle."

"Queenie, that sounds a little vulgar! If lovers are good for anything, and I believe that Frank is as good, and better, than most, they are superior husbands, in nearly every case. Why, my dear, I loved your mother ten times more after we were married than I did before; she was far more to me in the days when you were all little ones than she was while we were courting. She is dearer to me than ever now, after almost forty years of marriage. Ah! I often wonder whether we shall live to celebrate our golden-wedding day; we are getting well on for it, but the years try one far more when one gets advanced in life than in the days when health and strength abound. But it will be as God wills!"

"I wonder if Frank and I will feel so when we are old, or as Nurse says, 'well stricken in years'?"

"I hope so, darling, else I should hesitate a good deal, I fancy, before I gave my consent to your marriage. You *do* love him—don't you Queenie?"

"Of course I do, you silly old daddy! If I did not—if I did not feel entirely persuaded in my own mind that I love no man better, do you think I would go to the altar with him? But, after all, the question of questions is, Does Frank love me, and does he love me for life? For you know, father, the stronger love should not be on the woman's side; it is the man who should love the more tenderly. For all the poets say, 'Inconstancy is *not* the woman's defect, it is the man's.'"

"Who told you so, Regina?"

"I am not sure that any one told me so; I made it out, I think, of my own unaided genius. Well! I hope Frank will love me more and more till I die; and I shall always want my own way, you know—for I always did."

"And I am half afraid, my child, you have had your own way too much. I sometimes think if we had exercised—not a severer, but a stricter—discipline during your childish years, it might have been much better for you. You would have been a nobler, sweeter woman—a better wife."

"Now you are uncomplimentary, *mia padre!* I am glad it is you, and not Frank, who takes the trouble to tell me

such unwelcome truths. They are *wholesome* truths, perhaps, you will say ; but I do not think so. The more I am petted, the more exemplary I shall become ; anything like severity would be my ruin ; and I hope Frank quite understands that."

"I hope he understands you, Queenie—I hope you understand each other, for on mutual and entire comprehension depends the true happiness of married life. And for that sole reason I have steadfastly refused to give you to your husband till such time as I shall feel satisfied that, as betrothed lovers, you are wedded in heart and soul, and fully understand each other."

"You romantic old daddy ! I believe you must have had an overdose of sentimental novels in the days of your youth."

"In the days of my youth I had no time to read novels of any description ; I never even opened Sir Walter Scott's till after I was married. But I am sure you know what I mean, when I say I am waiting for you to understand each other. Mutual comprehension *grows*, undoubtedly ; but you must begin by a certain amount of it. Well, child, it is no use sermonising, for a wilful woman will have her way, and if ever a wilful woman lived in this world, you, *Felicia Regina Dorothy Osborne*, are that woman, and no mistake."

"If I want to be flattered I must not come to my father, it seems—nor to my mother, nor to my Aunt Rachel, nor to my brother Philip, who never fails to 'speak faithfully,' if opportunity serve. My other brothers, especially James and John, are a little better behaved, because, I suppose, we have been separated for so many years. But commend a girl to her own family—to her 'nearest and dearest,' for actual compliments ! I do hope the proclivity does not extend to husbands ; for if Frank follow suit, in the way of unpalatable truths, I am sure our first quarrel will not be far to seek. Now, don't begin another lecture, please, daddy ; for lectures stir up all the evil of my perverse nature, and make me positively wicked. My *métier* is to go my own way ; Frank's wisest policy will be to let me go it, without remonstrance or undue interference. I have an idea we are going to be very happy—quite a model couple."

"May God make you the happiest of the happy, both you and your promised husband."

"And when is the wedding to be? For Frank bothers a good deal, and says he is tired of waiting,—*he* pleaded for Easter!"

"He must wait a little longer, Queenie; I am resolved to stick to my word: your engagement must last during the whole twelvemonths. Tell Frank I am going to play the part of the hard-hearted father; he cannot be married before Midsummer, at the earliest."

"Very well, he must be contented to tarry. I am quite content. I am by no means inclined to abridge the interval of courtship, for it is a very pleasant interim, and, once over, is not likely to recur. Being engaged is *nice*; one thoroughly enjoys being waited on, and deferred to, and consulted, and indulged in all one's little whims; and Frank does make me the loveliest presents—as you know, though you have not seen the last I had—for he has taken it back to the jeweller's to have some needful alterations made. It is the most perfect thing I could ever have imagined, his own portrait on ivory, beautifully executed, and set round with diamonds and sapphires, to go with *my* sapphires, you understand. Oh, dear, I do love jewels! I can never have too many, or too costly ones, and Frank grudges me nothing; that is a comfort! I could never do with a stingy husband, I could not live with him. I should run away from him, *elope* with somebody, as the newspapers have it."

"My dear, do not say such a thing, even in jest. I would rather see you in your coffin, than mourn over you as an unfaithful wife."

"Of course! Such an idea is too shocking to be entertained; only I am not quite sure about the *coffin* as an alternative. And I may say that you have no objections to the middle of June for our wedding-day?"

"Any day after the 14th will do very well, that brings it near enough to the end of the stipulated year; for though not absolutely engaged till July, you and Frank were virtually courting for six weeks before. So you may hasten your preparations a little, if you think proper, and I will have the settlements put in hand at once. I suppose your

first step will be to say who shall be your bridesmaids, and how many you will have."

"I have decided as to the number. I did mean to have twelve; but mother says *six* are quite sufficient. We differed in our opinion, of course; and I am afraid I was rather persistent. But eventually we came to a compromise, and arranged for *eight*."

"Eight bridesmaids are at least two too many. Four would be ample, in my estimation; and you have not an overplus of young friends who will expect to be on the list. I should say Rosalie Harcourt, Bertha Howard, Frank's cousin, and the Derrington girls would do very well."

"What Derrington girls?"

"Our own Dolly and Annie, of course."

"I think, father, that the less we have to do with that family the better. Dolly is Dolly, and there is an end of it; and I suppose the world will talk if my 'adopted sister'—as everybody calls her—is *not* first bridesmaid. But Annie does not belong to us; and I am really afraid her connection with disreputable people is no very profound secret. Mrs. Derrington is not a bad sort of woman, by any means, though rather inferior. Those other girls, whose names I scarcely know, are mere nobodies, and must always take their place below the salt."

"Mrs. Derrington is a most worthy woman, and your mother is—well, really attached to her. She is not at all badly educated, and she knows her place and never presumes. The two young married daughters are quite respectable, though not very well off, as I hear; but I spoke of Annie only. She is the one sister whom we have always acknowledged, and I decided long ago that I would not separate Dolly from the exemplary members of her own family."

"We need not acknowledge any one. Dolly is a lady; Annie is not—she is simply a *governess*!"

"Do you dislike governesses?"

"As governesses, *yes*! They are very well in their way, and people—women—whose kindred have failed properly to provide for them must, of course, earn their own living,

and the more honestly they earn it the better. But governesses are decidedly lacking in *status*."

"Rubbish, Queenie! I shall lose my temper if I listen to you much longer. I estimate people at their true value, for what they really *are*, not for what they have. Lineage is not everything, though one ought to thank God that it has pleased Him to let us be born of a good, honest, decently-bred stock; my poor old mother deemed it an honour to be noticed by Miss Middlemore's mother, and yet Miss Middlemore is a governess to day, and has no *status* according to your showing."

"Miss Middlemore is altogether different, father. Her people have come down in the world, and that she cannot help. It is a great pity, certainly; but everybody knows *who* the Middlemores are, and what they were in their better days. Everybody respects them, too, while Annie Derrington, unlucky girl, will always be spoken of *as* a Derrington! There are governesses *and* governesses, you know; and it is by no means desirable to be intimate with people of doubtful condition. I shall be very particular, I assure you, what names I allow on my visiting list! I shall take care that no one, who is otherwise than perfectly *eligible*, has the *entrée* of my rooms."

"My dear, in one sense, you are quite right. I trust never to have the pain of finding that you admit doubtful characters. But you talk like young people who think they are supremely wise do talk. You will know the world better when you are a few years older; you will understand true worth, and appreciate the value of goodness and integrity, and good breeding, wherever it is to be found."

It was finally arranged that on June 18 Queenie should become Mrs. Frank Howard, and it suddenly occurred to her that even a later date might not be undesirable, considering all the work that was to be done, for she had planned a *trousseau* fit for a princess—an outfit unique in its magnificence, perfection, and marvellous completeness. Of course everybody was pressed into the bride's service, and numerous tradesmen were in full requisition. And then there was the residence to be decided on, and

decorated, and furnished in the most elegant and sumptuous style, and only the very best of everything was just good enough for Regina Osborne. Her bridesmaids were at last selected, and a great deal of time was spent in settling the fashion of the wedding garments.

Presents poured in on every side, of all sorts and every degree of value. Even old Nurse sat up at night to finish a certain knitted counterpane that had been in course of manufacture for nobody knew how many years; the children of Dolly's Sunday-school class worked diligently at kettle-holders and iron-holders, and teapot-mats and jug-mats, and all sorts of "mats" useful and ornamental! Dolly and Annie made things enough to stock a fancy bazaar, and especially produced anti-macassars, or "chair-backs," as they were even then beginning to be called, together with sofa-rugs and embroidered mantel-covers, and elaborate and gorgeous cushions of every description. As Mrs. Fairfax remarked, it was all fish that came to Queenie's net! Mrs. Derrington contented herself with some white braided bedroom toilet mats, and a pretty quilted satin bed-pocket, for she was pretty sure "no reasonable offer would be refused."

As for the costlier gifts, their name was Legion! Everybody who was anybody, and not a few nobodies who aspired to be somebodies, and with whom the Osbornes had ever exchanged civilities, furnished their quota of pretty or serviceable articles; and Mr. and Mrs. Frank Howard might set up housekeeping with any number of tea and coffee-services, dinner-services, breakfast-services, and dessert-services of every sort and description! To say nothing of a silver urn, and two or three silver kettles, Dresden and Sévres vases, and dozens upon dozens of fish-knives, and dessert-knives, and butter-dishes, and tea-caddies, and cake-baskets, and toast-racks, and biscuit-boxes, and apostle-spoons, and five hundred other things, all beautiful and useful in their way, and many of the costliest nature and the most elegant manufacture!

"'For whosoever hath, to him shall be given, and he shall have more abundance.' There is no truer word in Holy Scripture than that text," said Mrs. Fairfax, as she

did her best to find accommodation for the innumerable presents that seemed to be literally rained on the fortunate Queenie up to the very evening of the day before the wedding. "I should say she will never be able to make good use of all these things, even if she take to keeping a grand hotel. She has twenty-eight sugar-basins and seventeen butter-dishes, eleven biscuit-cases—three of them solid silver, wonderfully embossed—and more salt and sauce and special dessert spoons than I can count! I should advise her, when the wedding festivities are fairly over, to make her selection of all these grand things, and put up the rest for auction!"

CHAPTER XXXV.

ON THE WEDDING JOURNEY.

"I BELIEVE we shall have splendid weather for our grand day to-morrow," said Mrs. Fairfax to Dolly, as they sat in the old schoolroom, putting the finishing touch to several unimportant trifles that had been left to the very last opportunity. "Sunday was such a showery day that I felt quite disheartened; it has been so fine since June came in that I thought it not unlikely we were going to get a thorough change; and really things looked most unpromising. There was a halo round the moon, the wind sighed and moaned in that peculiar tone that nearly always predicates a spell of rain and wind; the swallows flew so low they almost skimmed the pool; nurse was grumbling over her rheumatic knee, and the peacock squalled till the sun was fairly set. All things seem to fortell a change for the worse. Monday, too, was a very lowering day; and early yesterday morning I thought we were in for a heavy thunder-storm."

"So did I, Auntie; but the wind changed at the same time, and blew away all pluvial indications, and the glass

has been steadily rising ever since. Nurse was quite sure that her rheumatism meant nothing; and the peacock and the swallows meant nothing, nor even the misty horizon. It was only the 'fulling of the moon,' she assured me; there might be a shower or two, but it would be all right again by Thursday morning. But she does not approve of Thursday; for the day of the week makes all the difference to the marriage! She wanted *Wednesday*; but everything was so finally settled, and she has a superstition about putting off a wedding, and did not want to make Queenie uneasy."

"Uneasy about what? Though I suppose she would be something more than uneasy if we awoke to-morrow morning to pelting rain and howling wind, or to a thorough downpour, such as it was the morning my Tom and his Barbara were married. Oh! there is nursie; I'll call and ask her what she meant. She has such quaint notions; I rather like to listen to some of them. Nurse! if you are not too busy, come and tell me why you wanted Miss Osborne to be married to-day instead of to-morrow! *I think* to-morrow will be a splendid day!"

"And so do I, Mrs. Fairfax; and so does Miss Regina. Bless her heart, she has been singing upstairs and down—

'There will not be a drop of rain, the whole of the life long day;
And I'm to be Queen of the May, mother; I'm to be Queen of the
May!'

Only we have done with May, thank goodness! She'll be just a Midsummer Queen!"

"Yes, nurse; and to-morrow will be one day nearer the longest day than to-day."

"But to-morrow is Thursday! And did you never hear, ma'am, the old rhyme? I've marked many a time in my life—that has been no short one—how true it falls out—

'Monday for health;
Tuesday for wealth;
Wednesday the best day of all!
Thursday for crosses;
Friday for losses;
Saturday no day at all!'

That is so far as marriage is concerned! Now, I shouldn't like my dear bairn to have *crosses* in her wedded life."

"But nurse, believe me, it is only nonsense, it means nothing—it is just an old saying. I was married to my husband on Wednesday; but it did not prevent my being left a widow, all too soon."

"Well, ma'am, may be it doesn't really signify; but I should be glad to think that if there is such a thing as 'good luck' in the world, my darling should have the very best there is. And I don't doubt but that she'll have real '*Queen's weather*' for her bridal—for you see she was always the favourite of fortune. But we shall pray, all of us, that she may know nothing about *crosses*."

"That would not be wise, nurse; it would not be really kind. A character requires its crosses to make it what it ought to be. All sun and no shower is no better for the human creature than for the senseless things in the garden. And there is another old saying that you must have heard, I dare say? 'No cross, no crown!'"

"Yes, ma'am, I have heard it often and often; and, what's more, I know it's true. Still, I hope the good Lord will spare the dear child, and lead her in the right way without much chastening. It does one good to be crossed sometimes—makes one more unselfish; but it would grieve me sore if hard trouble fell upon her that's had so much her own way."

"She has had too much her own way, nurse; you've all combined to spoil poor Queenie! She has been permitted—nay, encouraged—to live for herself in almost every particular."

"She never could bear to be thwarted."

"But, nurse, she cannot go through life and *never* be thwarted. I have hopes of her now, great hopes, that she is going to be married. I do trust Mr. Howard will not follow suit, and give up to her in everything; she has had quite enough spoiling so far. A little kindly discipline would do so much for her. If she could be only brought to see that the world does not go round entirely on her account—if she could be taught something of the virtue of self-sacrifice. Don't pray for her that she may have *no* crosses! Pray, rather, that God, who knows exactly what she needs, may train her as only He can train her—He who

is too good to be in the least unkind, and too wise to make even a small mistake."

"Anyway, ma'am, I shall pray Him to bless my dear child. May He grant her all prosperity, both for this world and for that which is to come. And I am well content that she should take Mr. Howard; a kinder, better-hearted man never lived; he's just the one for Miss Regina! A man is bound to be a little trying, I am thinking—it's the nature of men—but I believe he'll try her far less than most men. And she'll be so safe with him, for he'll do all he can to make her happy. I've prayed that it might be he, ever since they two opened the ball together, three years and a-half ago. If he is not very handsome, she has got beauty enough for the pair of them; and one needn't be afraid it's her money he is after, for he's got plenty of his own."

Thursday morning broke gloriously in the Eastern skies, and the household at "The Acacias" was early astir. The gardeners had been charged to reserve all their most beautiful flowers for this day; the same people who had served the memorable ball supper were also to serve the wedding-breakfast; the table was already being set, and the florist's men were busy everywhere. By ten o'clock all was completed, and nothing remained but for the bride and her bridesmaids to attire themselves for the solemnity. The day was evidently about to fulfil the promise of its splendid dawn.

The church was crowded. Everybody who could turned out to see the beautiful Miss Osborne married; and the way across the Common, which the wedding party would be sure to take, was thronged as if a royal procession were expected. Queenie, in spotless, sheeny white, with her coronet of pearls, and one lustrous diamond star confining her almost priceless lace veil, was, of course, the cynosure of all eyes. Never was a lovelier bride led to the altar; and her eight bridesmaids followed—a brilliant spectacle.

The church was tastefully decorated; and Queenie's one terrible fear that the registrar might forget his engagement and omit to present himself, as in duty bound, was not fulfilled—he was in his place before she entered the porch.

The organist was there, too, discoursing his finest music ; the pastor, in his robes, stood before the Communion Table ; and as Queenie stood beside her bridegroom, the coloured sunbeams, as they passed the richly-stained window, fell athwart the snowy folds of her sweeping train and lighted up the golden-brown ringlets that fell like a shower beneath the orange blossoms.

Queenie's tones were low, but quite clear ; the service was not a long one. In a few minutes, as it seemed to the standers-by, the vows of the bridal pair were pronounced, the irrevocable words were spoken, the pastor had given his few well-chosen words of counsel, and the wedding party had passed to the vestry, there to record their names and exchange kindly greetings. It was all over—the loud triumphant chords of the Wedding March resounded from aisle to aisle ; the bride and bridegroom were borne away homeward, and the father and mother followed, not as they had arrived, in separate carriages, but together, for, as Jonathan said, with broken voice : “The child is our own no longer, Chrissie ; you and I must be more than ever to each other.”

The banquet that ensued was very much like other banquets of the same character ; there were the usual speeches, only Mr. Osborne broke down almost at the commencement of his, and Frank Howard's composure failed him not a little, though there was something of exultation in his voice as he returned thanks on behalf of his bride and himself. Philip, as best man, proposed the health of the bridesmaids in somewhat unsteady tones, and there were some tears that would not be repressed. It was with difficulty Dolly restrained the emotion that almost overpowered her ; the costly viands were wasted upon her, and she very nearly choked over her champagne glass.

At last it came to an end ; the carriage that was to convey the happy couple to the railway station, whence the train started for Dover, was duly announced ; Queenie, attended by her bridesmaids, retired to exchange her bride's robes for a travelling costume ; adieux were spoken, there were numberless kisses and loving farewells, followed by the orthodox *fusillade* of old slippers and flowers, and a

plentiful shower of rice as Mr. and Mrs. Howard, amid cheers and countless blessings, drove away from "The Acacias."

The evening was dreary enough, though the young people danced merrily and with plenty of spirit. Once more Dolly led off the quadrille with Philip; but every one thought how sad and pale she looked, how heavy were her fine dark eyes, as with the weight of unshed tears; how silently she moved among the merry dancers. And not a few remarked that Miss Dolores was feeling very keenly the separation from her adopted sister, and that wedding festivities, as a rule, after the wedding itself was over, were altogether a mistake. Mr. and Mrs. Osborne took leave of their guests quite early in the evening and retired to rest; Dolly and Miss Howard remained to do the honours; Mrs. Fairfax did her best to make the party as cheerful as might be; but it was broken up betimes, only to the regret of the very few who were tireless in the dance, and eager for any amount of gaiety.

Dolly was but too thankful when the last of the visitors who were not remaining the night took their departure, when the last light below was extinguished, and the last sound of mirth had ceased. She was not left to solitude, however, for the house was full to overflowing, and it had been arranged that she was to share her room with Bertha Howard, Frank's cousin—who had also shared with her the duties of "first bridesmaid." She would very willingly have been alone; but there was no alternative, every bed was occupied, and nearly all the ladies were similarly situated. Philip was the only person under that roof who was so blest as to have an apartment to himself, and he was content to take possession of the bath-room, and resign his usual *habitat* to a couple of friends, who had come over from some town a hundred miles distant, and could not be expected to return till the following day.

"Are you very tired, Dolly?" said Bertha Howard, as the two girls threw aside their festal robes, and began to brush out their unbound tresses.

"Very!" replied Dolly, repressing a sigh; "I think I was never so tired in life; but it was past twelve before I

got to bed last night, then I slept badly, and was up again by five. Weddings are wearisome affairs ; it is well they do not happen frequently. Ah, well ! there will not be another very soon in this house."

"I suppose your own wedding will be the next ?"

"I fancy that will not occur just yet ; I have almost promised mother and father that I will stay at home, and look after them to the end. And if ever I do marry, it will be a very quiet affair, not all like this one."

"Of course, Queenie, as the daughter of the house, was expected to make a grand figure. Did she not look lovely ? Frank told me, before I ever saw her, that she was the very loveliest woman the world ever beheld, and I think he is right. Hers is a beauty about which there can be no possible question ; I never could have imagined such perfect features, such wonderful eyes—just like sapphires—and such a complexion ! She seems to unite in herself all possible perfections ; and all good fortune seems to be hers also."

"Yes ; no end of good things fall to her share. Prosperity has been hers always, from her earliest childhood ; she is blessed with perfect health, she is really beautiful, and is nearly always in the best of spirits. She loves jewels and costly dress ; and they come to her unbidden, and she has thirty thousand pounds of her very own !"

"And a tolerably rich husband, who is devoted to her ! Yes ; she really is, I believe, the most fortunate person I have ever known. When Evelyn Murray was saying last night how much she hoped it would be fine to-day, and that the sunset was promising, Queenie responded in her light-hearted way, and with that sweet little rippling laugh of hers : 'Of course, it will be fine, Evy ; it would not rain on my wedding-day ! Every blessing falls to my share, you know, and always did. I am fortune's special favourite !'"

"And so she is."

"Of course, I heard all about her jewels being lost several years ago. And, lo ! unsummoned, they return to her—the sapphires, at least. What splendid gems they are ! They were given her on her seventh birthday, were they not ?"

“Yes ; they were presented by ‘Aunt Jemima,’ the Mrs. Marmaduke Merridew who left her the thirty thousand pounds. They are called ‘star sapphires,’ to distinguish them from inferior sorts, or rather, I should say, because the light reflected upon them forms a star, or *asteria*, of six rays ; extremely beautiful and remarkable.”

“Queenie’s are like no others that I ever saw. That is why, I suppose, the man who so cleverly appropriated them could not by any means dispose of them. But he did manage to get rid of the pearls ?”

“Why, there was nothing so very remarkable about them. They were really fine pearls, and worth a good deal of money ; but there was not nearly so much fuss made about them as about the sapphires. It was considered there was not another set exactly like *them* in England, and only a very few in all the world. They were so well known everywhere—the description being circulated far and wide—that no one would run the risk of purchasing them till the hue-and-cry was somewhat over.”

“And who really had them, after all ?”

“You have not heard ?”

“I have heard nothing. Though Adelaide Harcourt was telling a lot of us a very curious story the other day ; and, according to her account, they were detained all the while by the wife of that accomplished thief, who gave himself out as *Count Stanger*, and invited himself to your birthday ball. Was it so ?”

“Not exactly ; but please ask no more questions, for I am not free to answer them. Any how, the sapphires are home again, and quite uninjured—there is not one of them missing. Adelaide said a good many things that were not quite correct about the robbery.”

“Adelaide talked very freely about Count Stanger, who seems to have deceived a good many people. Was he really so handsome ?”

“I did not think him so, but other persons did ; and there are many different tastes where looks are concerned. ‘Aunt Jemima,’ from whom the fortune, as well as the sapphires, were inherited, saw him at the ball, and formed the worst possible conclusion. She told Mr. Osborne to

take care how he admitted such doubtful people to his home, worse than doubtful, to her mind. She stigmatised him as a 'rascal and a *liar!*'"

"But tell me, Dolly, did you believe in him?"

"Not in the least. I always felt sure that he was an *impostor!* Perhaps it was that he did not flatter me as he did poor Queenie. But what was Mr. Howard's opinion? He opened the ball with Queenie that night, as you must have been told."

"Frank was so absorbed in Queenie that he paid very little attention to other people. He had a dim remembrance of a 'foreign-looking fellow,' as he called him, dancing once or twice with Queenie, and he was angry at the man's presumption. But I do not think he concerned himself greatly about him, there were so many people there that night; and he was not a little startled by the sudden apparition of Mrs. Marmaduke Merridew. But Adelaide displeased him by her comments on Queenie's weakness of character; she said any low-bred flatterer might make a downright fool of her! She could always be won by an unscrupulous appeal to her vanity. Is she really so vain, do you think?"

"If she be rather vain, one can easily excuse her. Her extraordinary loveliness must be an unusual temptation. But since her engagement to your cousin she has altered considerably for the better. I am so glad that she is safely married to a man who is absolutely worthy of her. I always had a lurking fear that she might be induced to listen to the representations of some good-for-nothing adventurer, who cared nothing for herself, but only for her large fortune, and perhaps—just a little for her marvellous beauty."

"I am pleased that you appreciate Frank, Dolly. Indeed, you all seem to rate him at his true value. There is no better man anywhere than my cousin Frank. He is not handsome, certainly; but he has a fine expression, and there is a certain sweetness and goodness in his face that cannot be mistaken. He is not brilliant, but on certain points he is decidedly clever; and I sometimes think he is almost too generous, too unselfish, for this wicked world."

In my estimation, charming Queenie has won a treasure, an unequalled prize in matrimony ; he deserves a wife as good and true as she is lovely."

Dolly wondered whether pretty Bertha might not have been attached to Frank herself, she evidently held him in such profound esteem. But that was really all ; Bertha's affection for Frank and his for her were mutual, and of purely cousinly character. She loved him as she loved her brothers ; only she accorded to him the highest place in her regards, and neither had the least inclination to change the pleasant and simple relationship, which had existed between them since Bertha's early childhood, for she was full seventeen years younger than her highly-respected cousin.

"I sincerely trust they will make each other truly happy," was Dolly's concluding observation, as she laid her head on her pillow, with the hope that the conversation was ended, and slumber near at hand. "God bless them, and bestow upon them all joy ; and do for them more than we can ask or wish ! Good night, dear."

And in a few minutes Dolly, utterly worn out with the long day's excitement and exertions, fell soundly asleep, while her bed-fellow breathed quietly at her side. The young ladies reposed in peace through the summer night, and did not awake till Mrs. Fairfax came to give them notice that breakfast was quite ready, and Mr. Osborne and Philip already seated.

And now for awhile to follow the bride and bridegroom on their journey. Of course, the *coupé* was retained for their benefit, and they travelled most comfortably to Dover, and found themselves, while the rosy sunset light still lingered on the Channel waves, happily settled in the rooms that had been engaged for them at the Lord Warden Hotel. They were to halt there for the night, and cross the water when it pleased them, sometime on the following day.

Paris was the goal to which their steps were directed, and on the third night of their wedding-journey Mr. and Mrs. Howard found themselves at the *Hôtel Bristol*, where, long ago, Queenie had resolved to tarry on her bridal tour ; though at that time she had not the remotest notion by whom she would be accompanied, nor when the important

event would take place, only she was perfectly convinced that at some not very distant period the marriage would take place with *somebody*, who would bestow upon her high rank—perhaps a title—immense wealth, unheard-of graces and accomplishments, as became the well-born, dignified personage who would aspire in due time to her hand, who would certainly be remarkably handsome; and, to crown all, her devoted lover for the remainder of her life.

And as she sat in the almost palatial drawing-room of the hotel, looking down upon the busy crowds that thronged the pavement of the lighted *Place de Vendôme*, she mused within herself as to the accomplishment of those past aspirations. She was alone for some minutes, for Mr. Howard had gone in search of several important letters, which he had fully expected to be awaiting him on their arrival at the hotel.

“Here I am at the *Hôtel Bristol*, after all! just where I said I would be when I was a girl at school. And I really do think I have married very well. Frank has plenty of money, quite enough to match mine, and perhaps he will have more; indeed, I know he will, when that quaint old gentleman, his uncle, dies! And he loves me, too, sincerely; he *satisfies* me, and that is something to say; he is more my lover now than before we were married; he thinks nothing good enough for me; if I only express the smallest wish it is granted, and that immediately. And that is well; for a plain, common-place, every-day affection would never be enough for me. I like to be worshipped—it just suits me; I have been made much of all my life. Yes; I am content; I have married—well, not my ideal; but very happily and suitably! And my parents are well pleased, and so are my brothers; I do believe James and John, and even Philip, did everything they could to push forward the match—Herbert and Oliver were simply agreeing thereunto. I shall always say Frank was my brothers’ choice, and he is mine, too; or else—well, I suppose all *their* prepossessions would have been in vain! One thing is sure, I never loved any man half so well in my life; I am fully and completely happy; it is so good to be loved passionately, and served so entirely *à la princesse*! Yes; I

do love Frank, as I never loved any one before, and I do hope I always shall ; for it would be so inconvenient, so everything that is not respectable, to prefer another man to one's own husband ! I wonder where he is ? It is quite time he was back again."

And even as Queenie wished her husband's speedy return she caught sight of his manly figure crossing the *Place* ; and in less than five minutes he was seated with her at the window.

"Well, darling !" was his fond greeting ; "is my little Queen almost tired of being left to her own devices ?"

"Yes ; quite tired, Frank. Remember, you are never to leave me too long alone, at any time. I have never been accustomed to solitude, and, except now and then, at intervals, I do not like it. And now I am married, and have my own loving husband, I shall not expect to be left to my own resources."

"Your loving husband, dearest, will never willingly leave you, you may be well assured. How long shall you care to remain in Paris ?"

"Till I wish to go elsewhere. We must have a few drives in the *Bois* ; and there are several places I should like to see. Especially, I want you to give me some of the prettiest trifles in the *Rue de la Paix* ; I was always delighted to go there when I was at school, only I was obliged to content myself with selecting, in imagination, the loveliest jewels I could see, and thinking of the happy day when I should be able to make actual purchases. Shall we order a *voiture de remise* to-morrow morning, and take a little *cours* ? I want to see the *Rue de la Paix* once more."

"You shall go where you like, sweet, and choose the very jewels that you especially admire. And you shall dine exactly where you like, and then we can enjoy a drive in the *Bois*—can we not ?"

"Of course we can ; but I would far rather go to the opera, or to see the play at the new theatre they were talking of in the train yesterday. On the whole, I should prefer the opera. I have an idea it is *Tannhauser* to-morrow night. They will secure seats for us downstairs, the best that can be had, if you speak in proper time. I

am too tired to go anywhere to-night, unless, indeed, we took a *petit cours* in the lighted boulevard after dinner. By the way, you really ought to speak French."

"So I do, after a fashion; I can generally contrive to make myself understood. I always manage to get the very thing I ask for, sooner or later; but your French is perfect, Queenie; it is quite delightful to hear you chatter as glibly as any lady born and bred in Paris. My French, such as it is, will serve my turn, especially while you are at my elbow to rattle away whenever I am in fault."

"I wish you spoke fluently for yourself. *My* husband ought to speak every language—French and German, at least—perfectly. Where shall we go when we are tired of Paris?"

"Wherever you wish, my Regina."

"I think, then, I shall choose to visit Rome."

"That is the one thing, I am very much afraid, that you cannot do."

"Why not? Florence Paterson spent several weeks there on her wedding tour, and she enjoyed it immensely. I do know a little Italian, for I learnt some at the *Maison D'Or*. I could make myself fairly understood, I fancy. Yes, I *must* go to Rome, my dear; I am seized with a sudden desire to visit the Colosseum by moonlight and to drive on the Pincio. Why should we not go, when we have done all that is worth doing, and seen all that we care to see, and bought all that we want to buy here?"

"But, my Queen, one cannot go to Rome at this season of the year. It is high summer now."

"Of course it is; but, you dearest of goosey-ganders, what is that to us, if we make up our minds to go?"

"It is everything to us, my love; Rome is extremely unhealthy during the summer months; it is not safe at Easter, if it happen to fall rather later than usual. There is always the risk of Roman fever."

"What is Roman fever? Is it dangerous?"

"Most dangerous! people die of it sometimes, and those who once suffer from it are more or less liable to it for years. It is a fever which results chiefly, I believe, from the *malaria* which pervades the whole locality, and to which

even the natives fall victims occasionally in the hottest weather. But when the English are attacked it is too often fatal."

"What a nuisance! and I had so set my heart on buying cameos in Rome; and to think we chose just the wrong time of the year for getting married! We might try Naples, then; I should like to see Vesuvius in eruption."

"Naples is equally insanitary in June and July, and Vesuvius is in repose just now, unless I am greatly mistaken."

"Where, then, *shall* we go? I know I shall take a restless fit in about ten days. Oh! why did we not wait till September? we might have gone to Rome then—or Naples—or anywhere! Is there any safe place to visit?"

"Oh, yes; we can proceed from Paris straight to Geneva. It is just the right time, or will be, next month, to see the Swiss Lakes and the Alps, and we might go on through the Tyrol to the Italian Lakes, and so to Venice. Would not that be beautiful, Queenie?"

"I suppose it would; but I had so set my heart on Rome, and I never could bear to be thwarted. Still, if Rome be really impracticable now——"

"Believe me, darling, it is utterly impracticable. No wish of yours shall ever be ungratified if I can rule circumstances; but here I am powerless, and nothing shall tempt me to risk your health, your precious life, in a climate that might be fatal before you had breathed it many hours. Let us enjoy ourselves to the utmost while we remain in Paris, and when we feel inclined to move on let us start to Geneva. You would be delighted with the lake, I am sure, dearest."

"Perhaps I should, for I have been told that it is a really charming place. The lake is so beautifully blue, and the Castle of Chillon is interesting, and the distant Alps so lovely. One can see Mont Blanc from Geneva, I fancy, or certainly from Chamounix; and we can go there, or anywhere else that seems promising. Then there are Lucerne, Lausanne, and ever so many more lakes—I know Miss Middlemore made me learn the names of lots of them, more than I ever could remember. Yes; I think I shall

like that, it will be all so new—for I have never seen even the English lakes ; father and mother were always content with Tenby. I shall expect you to take me everywhere, Frank, now we are married. Oh, it is good to have your own husband, and do everything you want ; I would not be unmarried again for the world.”

“Of course not, dearest ; we shall be a thousand times happier than we have ever been before ; I am far, far happier, as it is, and I will take good care that you are—well, happier and happier as the happy days and years glide by.”

“A husband is a most excellent institution, I am convinced. A woman needs some one upon whom she may fully and always depend. An old maid’s fate must, indeed, be a dreadful one ; I always set myself against prolonged spinsterhood ; I should have hated to live and die unwedded.”

“No fear of your joining the army of ‘unappropriated blessings,’ my pet, though there are spinsters in the world that we cannot but respect. My maiden aunt strenuously maintains that creation itself would come to ‘universal smash,’ were it not for the invaluable *spinsters*, going up and down the earth, continually sacrificing themselves and their time for the benefit of the married people.”

“A certain number of old maids is undoubtedly useful, just as poor relations are. They are always ready to come and keep house for you, when you do not think it quite prudent to rely only upon your servants. They are invaluable when there are workmen about the place ; they don’t mind the smell of paint, nor the slap-dash of whitewashing ceilings—in fact, they can’t afford to be too particular, or to stand upon their own dignity. Old maids and poor relations must make themselves generally useful, or else retire into strictly private life. Do you know that Dolly has notified her intention of remaining single as long as she lives ?”

“No ; and it will not be very easy to carry out that little arrangement, I should say. Dolly is really a beautiful girl, and a very nice one, too ; and for a brunette, she is remarkably handsome—quite of the Andalusian type, indeed,

And do you know, I am almost positive your brother Philip admires her hugely?"

"I almost think he does—indeed, I am sure of it. But, of course, he cannot, out of respect to himself and to his family, dream for a moment of marrying her. Also, she knows that it is not her duty to encourage him; she owes something to the people who have been so generous to her for the last fourteen years. Dolly is a fine girl, I grant, and she is good and clever and very well educated; she has the Osbornes to thank for that, of course!—but still, she is Dolly Derrington, and by no means Philip's equal."

"But she has been brought up as Philip's equal, and she has always been treated as your sister. And if Philip really loves her, why should he not be happy? I am so blessed myself, that I should like other good fellows—your brother in particular—to be as blessed as I am. If I could have my way, the course of true-love should *invariably* run smooth. My motto should be 'Love will still be lord of all.'"

"A very foolish motto, let me tell you, sir, if indiscriminately applied. Dolly standing by herself I could scarcely object to—for we all love dear old Doll! But when I remember that she is the daughter of my father's hired servant—I am compelled to hesitate. Not only is she of a race with which our blood cannot, and must not, commingle, but some of her connections are most disreputable."

"I know that some of her relatives are very humble people."

"They are something worse than that, Frank! You must know that her eldest sister married a professed burglar and cheat, and retained possession of stolen goods up till the very day before her death. Knowing that she was actually *in extremis*, my father and Philip—chiefly for Dolly's sake, I suppose—promised that she should be unmolested. She stipulated that she should be left to die in peace, I believe, and she was left. Meanwhile, her rascally husband managed to put the sea between himself and those who might have brought him to justice. I could tell you a great deal more if you do not already know it, only it is a subject on which I detest to speak. So let us

talk no more of Dolly, save as an accepted member of the family by whom she was unwisely, perhaps, *adopted*. If she is in any way my sister, she is also Philip's sister, and that sisters and brothers cannot marry is indisputable. Still, you must perceive that in every way such a *mésalliance* is quite out of the question."

And Queenie seemed so ruffled, and was for the rest of the evening so thoroughly discomposed, that Mr. Howard privately resolved never to speak of Dolores Derrington otherwise than as a respected inmate of "The Acacias," and on no account to couple her name with that of his brother-in-law and valued friend, Philip Osborne.

At the end of ten days Queenie fulfilled her own prediction of herself, and became—*restless*. In spite of her liberal *trousseau*, she gave several orders at *Worth's*, and she laid in a good stock of kid gloves and high-heeled slippers, and of embroidered *lingerie*, and she coaxed Frank into making her countless presents of jewellery, selected in the *Rue de la Paix*, and innumerable costly trifles, such as can always be purchased in the *Palais Royal*, provided one has a purse well replenished with golden coin. And a capable, well-recommended maid was engaged, who undertook the careful packing of all Mrs. Howard's robes, and laces, and *lingeries*, and bonnets, and jewels, and valuables generally.

Melanie—who was really a respectable young woman, understanding her business perfectly—having cleverly packed all the manifold items of her mistress's property, followed her master and mistress to the railway-station, and took train for Geneva. Mr. and Mrs. Howard enjoyed their journey amazingly, and spent a very pleasant week on the borders of the lake: visited the Castle of Chillon, and other notable spots; went on to Lucerne and then to Lausanne; commenced the ascent of Mont Blanc, which they continued till, wearied out and somewhat chilled, they arrived at an elevation so very far below the summit, that they never could be persuaded to mention it distinctly; and finally crossed the Alps, and found themselves in Italy.

A very charming week was passed in Venice, where Queenie made a discovery which caused her no little

chagrin. Her Italian was only school-girl's Italian, and the people talked so much faster than she had expected, and depended so extensively on gesture and tone of voice, that she failed ignominiously to understand, or to make herself understood. Nevertheless, the wedded pair spent some very pleasant hours on the Lagoons, and on the famous Piazza di San Marco; and, after all, as Queenie declared, they had actually "done" Venice and seen Torcello, and bought glass at Murano, and could always speak of having been there on their wedding tour. When they came to Florence they were tired of travel, and anxious to turn their faces homewards, and having bought a few mosaics, they hurried back to Paris, and finally to London.



CHAPTER XXXVI.

SEVEN YEARS AFTERWARDS.

SEVEN years had rolled on their way since Mr. and Mrs. Frank Howard returned from their three months' wedding tour, and established themselves in their beautiful home on the borders of Richmond Park. Their place was called "Oakenshaw," from the numbers of oaks of all ages and description that grew about the grounds, which were tolerably extensive. It was difficult to say to what township or district Oakenshaw really belonged; most people considered that it belonged to Richmond; but according to various documents in the possession of the old gentleman from whom Mr. Howard's uncle purchased the said property, it would appear that the Oakenshaw estate was actually and legitimately situate on the ancient demesne of East Sheen.

And there, in the popular "home county" of Surrey, Queenie and her husband had lived and flourished ever since they took possession of their own house, when their

Continental travels had at last come to a conclusion. Sheen—or rather Shene, as most folks are fully convinced—derived its name from a Saxon word, signifying “brightness.” And within the confines of East Sheen—and once upon the royal estate itself—was Oakenshaw, presented to Frank Howard on his marriage with the beautiful and well-endowed Felicia Regina Dorothea Osborne.

Regina was not greatly altered since last we saw her crossing the Straits of Dover on her return journey. She had the same ivory complexion, the same perfection of feature, the same delicate wild-rose tints, the same beautiful eyes, nearly matching her own resplendent sapphires; the same profusion of rippling golden-brown hair, and the same dimpled, white hands. Her personal charms had in no wise deteriorated, but rather matured; though some of her old friends thought—or, perhaps, fancied—that the expression of her lovely face was not quite as sweet as in her girlhood it had been; there were now and again dark shadows on her snowy brow; fitful glances of discontent shone from the hyacinthine violet eyes; and something was lost—or seemed to be lost—from the childish purity, the ingenuousness of early days.

And yet it was continually admitted that Queenie, as wife and mother, had gained, rather than lost, in beauty. She had given birth to three children, the eldest a delicate—we had almost said *sickly*—boy, inheriting none of his mother’s rare loveliness, nor her faultless physique, in any particular; but “featuring,” as one of the old Howard servants was wont to remark with much satisfaction, his excellent father, his great uncle, and his paternal family generally. Now, poor Frank, except for a certain sweetness and goodness of expression which his plain features displayed, was not at all handsome. Queenie had the want of taste to complain of his “almost ugliness,” and to pour forth her ceaseless regrets that his little son grew more and more like him every day of his life.

Unhappily, Queenie had never *taken* to this, her first-born child and only son; she had resented from the very first his somewhat urgent claims on her maternal attention; she had complained loudly of his fretful disposition, of his continued

ill-health; of the consequent peevishness of his temper. And, in truth, poor little Frank was not by any means an engaging child; he had neither a pretty face nor pretty ways; he had a shrill, piercing voice—a heavy, gloomy expression of countenance, and a provoking habit of crying for nothing, during a great part of every day, and sometimes all day long. But old Susan—who had nursed Frank Howard himself through his delicate infancy—protested frequently that the poor lamb was not to blame for his ceaseless wail, as he was nearly always suffering from some baby ailment, and had to endure from his *teeth* what never unfortunate little mortal endured before. And Susan sometimes expressed herself a little strongly, and declared to her *confidantes* that Mrs. Frank had taken an aversion to her eldest child, and was neither more nor less than an “unnatural mother!”

Poor little Frank did not improve, either in health or temper, as he grew older; but on the contrary, tried his parents by contracting every disease to which infant flesh and blood is commonly liable. He had fits, and he got his teeth with extreme difficulty, and seemed, even to his tender nurse, “never to have done with cutting them!” When he came to be vaccinated he was a source of terrible anxiety—first of all, “not taking,” as the doctor at East Sheen strove to explain to Mrs. Howard, and then “taking” so intemperately as to display all the symptoms of positive *small-pox*. Of course he had measles twice over, and scarlatina, and rose rash, and whooping-cough, and mumps, and maladies—“quite unbecoming his tender years,” as his mother frequently complained. The doctor was never out of the Oakenshaw nursery, and it was almost entirely on the son-and-heir’s behalf; for the little girls were as robust and healthy as their luckless brother was the reverse.

Queenie had two daughters, of whom she was very proud, and whom she regarded with actual maternal affection. She *loved* both Felicia and Dorothy, and watched over them with really exemplary solicitude. They were twins, and very pretty children, though not exactly inheriting their mother’s unequalled beauty; but they were fair enough of face to satisfy her desires. They were naturally amiable and gentle;

and, rejoicing always in rosy, unbroken health, were constitutionally happy and even-tempered. At the point at which we find Queenie again, wife and mother, and mistress of lordly Oakenshaw, little Frank was in his seventh year, and the twins exactly five. The Misses Howard's birthday would be on September 30, and now it only wanted a week to that date.

And Dolly Derrington—what of her? You will be glad to hear that for full five years she has been Mrs. Philip Osborne, and is living most happily with her affectionate husband and their mutually beloved parents in the dear old home at Clapham Common.

When Queenie had finally quitted "The Acacias," Dolores, of course, remained sole daughter of the house; and Philip at once re-assumed his position of lover. And so precious did Dolly become to both father and mother, and so increasingly valuable in every respect, that Jonathan, as well as Chrissie, came speedily to the conclusion that they could not act more wisely than give their unqualified consent to the marriage that was now openly proposed, and by Philip ceaselessly urged. Kitty was dead, and in her quiet grave. Her name was never mentioned, save occasionally between Dolly and her stepmother, and that only when they were alone. Her disreputable husband was at the Antipodes, and pledged never to return to England. The Hancoxes were safely with him. Mr. Derrington himself was comfortably pensioned off by the firm; there was no reasonable barrier between the young people now, but every cause and plea for their legal union.

Chrissie needed very little persuasion. Dolly had been her staff and prime comfort for many years, and Dolly was to her as her own beloved child; Jonathan lent a far from unwilling ear to his son's representations. What arrangement could be more desirable than to secure at once, and for life, the daughter who had been all in all to them so long, and who would find her home with them to the end of their lives? And the house itself was large enough, in all conscience, to accommodate them, and any number of children that the Lord might bless them with.

Queenie had always opposed the match as a decided and

most undesirable *mésalliance*! But when she was once gone, and safely established at Oakenshaw, her influence was sensibly diminished. Dolly became more and more of a treasure; and to have her always, and as their *very own*, was evidently the most excellent and delightful and satisfactory of schemes. The elder brothers, too, were well affected; not for an hour did they "severely disapprove," as Queenie had once declared they most surely would. So Mrs. Frank Howard, discountenanced even by her husband, could only make her silent protest, and let things take their course; and in two years, or rather less, after her own brilliant marriage, Dolores Derrington and Philip Osborne were made husband and wife, and took up their permanent abode at "The Acacias."

I scarcely need assure you that this marriage was an exceedingly happy one, and that the "old people," as they soon came to be called, found their fondest hopes fulfilled, and all their best wishes gratified. Jonathan and Chrissie, Philip and Dolores, formed one peaceful, joyful, thrice-blessed household, and they all equally thanked the good Lord who had led them in His own loving way into the haven where they would be. And now—taking up the thread of the story once more—Mr. and Mrs. Philip Osborne were the grateful parents of three fine children—Ermyntrude, aged nearly four years and a-half; Annette, aged almost three; and Philip Ernest, a lovely baby-boy, little more than six months. And Mr. and Mrs. Osborne, senior, found inexpressible delight in the continued presence of these pretty grandchildren under the same roof.

Queenie was sitting in her own luxurious drawing-room on that warm golden afternoon in September. "Afternoon tea" was ready on an elegant tripod-table; and it was displayed in all the glories of a matchless, and almost priceless, porcelain service which Mrs. Howard had bought only a few days before at "Christie's." Antique china, curious and lovely *plaques*, rare mosaics, costly vases, inlaid cabinets, wonderful brackets, all sorts of rare and marvellous things contributed to ornament this most comfortably furnished apartment, for the mistress of Oakenshaw was most decidedly a "woman of taste," and expelled from

her splendid mansion whatever questionable ornament or domestic article was introduced to her acquaintance. She was a little cross, just at present, for it was her "Friday"—her own peculiar and favoured day, on which, hebdomadally, she "received" and administered to the friends of her select circle the refreshment which is now so universally fashionable, and called everywhere, "afternoon tea," whether it be served in cup and saucer of jewelled porcelain, or in a set of *any sort* of common serviceable material. And on this especial Friday she had been sitting almost two hours, expecting the arrival of sundry callers, who for reasons—known and unknown—failed to put in an appearance.

It was almost five o'clock, and the sun was slanting his mellowest rays through the still verdurous glades and woods of royal Richmond Park, on which certain windows of Oakenshaw "gave," as the French would say; and she was just ill-humouredly resigning herself to her disappointment when she thought she heard something like the bustle of an arrival. Though she had ceased to listen, there was certainly the clear vibration of a bell—for Queenie had insisted on "electric bells"—and she was quite certain that it was the front-door bell that was uplifting its silvery tintinabulatory alarum at that very moment.

Once more she resumed her expectant attitude, and glanced with satisfaction at her graceful reflection in the tall mirror opposite her velvet lounge, and at the elaborate *oilette* in which she had caused herself to be arrayed directly after her luncheon was over; and which had all the afternoon been wasting its sweetness on the desert air of solitude. Queenie was sitting in the innermost drawing-room—for there were three reception rooms *en suite* at Oakenshaw—and this third drawing-room, opening into a pavilion-like conservatory, was that in which Mrs. Howard always took up her station on the Friday afternoon, when all the world—*her world*, that is to say—knew quite well that she was "at home" to callers. And in the outermost room a door was softly opened, footsteps gently trod the Axminster carpet, and Queenie said, in her heart, "I do hope that is—Lady Bannersfield."

Nearer came the gliding steps ; Queenie looked up, rose, and was about to hasten into the second drawing-room, when the servant announced, in those distinct yet subdued tones which all the Oakenshaw domestics were taught to cultivate—" *Mrs. Philip Osborne.*"

"Dolly !" exclaimed Mrs. Howard, with the utmost politeness, only she advanced no step further into the second room—"I am so glad to see you. I have been sitting here these two hours, and not a creature has come near me. Is everybody out of town, I wonder?—or do people forget that I have 'an afternoon'?"

"I knew you would be at home to-day, so I decided to come ; and mother wanted some news of you," replied Dolly, as she seated herself at the other end of the luxurious lounge, and stirred her cup of tea, just offered by the footman in attendance. Queenie was too lazy to pour out for her guests herself, except upon special occasions—although there was an exquisitely-chased silver spirit-kettle always at her command. Her man had strict orders to present fresh cups on every succeeding arrival.

"Did you drive?" asked Queenie.

"No ; I came by train, and walked from Mortlake. I wanted a walk, and it is such a lovely afternoon."

"I should have taken a walk myself, in the park, had it not been my afternoon ; and here I have been, at home, for nothing at all. Only you have turned up, and that is some comfort, for I do not like wasting my time, even once a week."

"It is very disagreeable to waste your time," assented Dolly, gravely, and at the same time wondering privately what were Mrs. Howard's ideas on the subject of "well-employed time." "I suppose you go to Trouville next week?"

"I am afraid we do *not* ; that tiresome child has got something the matter with him again. Nothing of any consequence, you know, or of course I should be concerned. But he always is ailing and grumbling. I am sure a great deal of it is fancy and fretfulness. And Frank is so absurd about his boy ; he seems to fancy he never should be left, and I should be posted up on the Ladies' Mile, or de-

nounced in some horrid 'society' paper as 'an *unnatural mother*,' if I failed in the most trivial of one of my imaginary duties. It is a terrible trial to have a sickly child—one that is always wanting the doctor."

"Poor little fellow! he certainly is too much of an invalid for his tender years. He must require a great deal of attention; what is the matter just now?"

"I hardly know. His cough is troublesome again, and the glands are certainly abnormally swollen; and he has something of a *rash* about him—don't be alarmed; you are thinking of your own little ones; but I assure you there's nothing to fear—nothing in the least infectious. It is only that unsightly eruption come on again. I cannot make out how a child of mine should have a skin that is not quite clear. I suppose he inherits it from Frank. The doctor calls it *Eczema*—such a horrid disease!"

"I am not sure that it can be classed as a horrid disease, although I have no doubt it is a very troublesome malady; and I have heard Mr. Grahame say that in an adult subject it is very weakening."

"I am afraid it is incurable. The child will be a fright all his life, and ugliness is really repulsive to my nerves. If only his poor face were clear, I would not mind so much about his legs and his arms."

"Frank thinks, I know, that the complaint is something that followed on vaccination, and the child will grow out of it as he gets older. Vaccination is a great blessing, and I suppose it is a duty that must always be attended to; but I am just a little nervous about it—the operation is not invariably successful. I was very anxious about my little Annette, for nearly half a year afterwards; but what there was wrong she soon threw off. I am most thankful to know that all our children have good sound constitutions."

"The twins are splendidly healthy children, with complexions all cream and roses, and lungs that never give one an hour's solicitude. This poor little fellow has really no constitution at all; and I am convinced his miserable luck will follow him through life. And as for vaccination, I wonder what we should do without it! It is the only known safe-

guard against that terrible scourge—small-pox ; and it should never be neglected in childhood, nor, indeed, afterwards. I have been vaccinated seven times, and shall again if it seem to be at all expedient. I do believe, Dolly, I should commit suicide, or go hopelessly insane, if I once took small-pox, and were *disfigured*. And if my darling girls took it—I shudder to think for a moment of such a calamity—I am not quite sure, but I do believe I should wish them to die, and go to a better world, rather than survive and suffer through a lifetime the consequences of that most loathsome malady. Why, if you do not lose all trace of beauty, you are sadly marred, and your complexion is never the same again. So let us be thankful to Dr. Jenner—his memory ought to survive as that of a benefactor in the heart of every really good-looking woman. In former times, before the discovery of vaccination, how many a beautiful girl lost all her loveliness, if not her life ! ”

“ Perhaps by next week poor Frankie will be much better ; but he will want a great deal of care.”

“ In my opinion he has more ‘ care ’ than is at all good for him. Susan and his father spoil him between them, and make him quite a little *malade imaginaire*. A little wholesome neglect, I am convinced, would do him all the good in the world. *He wants bracing*.”

“ I should be afraid of the ‘ bracing system ’ for *him*, and perhaps Susan *may* be just a trifle given to coddling. However, dear, you will know in a day or two whether anything serious is impending. A fortnight at the coast would do you good, I dare say. Of course, I go with the children in July or August ; but I do like a week or so with Philip, all to myself, while the autumn lingers. I feel all the better for the little change when winter actually sets in.”

“ If you see Frank, just tell him that,” returned Queenie, quite impressively. “ He thinks a good deal of your opinion, Dolly, I can tell you ; it is not quite complimentary to his wife, but I am sure he gives you credit for a judgment far superior to my own. But the truth is, Frank has taken something of dislike towards all French watering-places. It is simply prejudice, or it may be mere whim. His temper is by no means what it was ; he is abominably

irritable, sometimes. I wish he would let me go by myself."

"Suppose you went to Eastbourne, or Littlehampton, or Brighton."

"I never care for Eastbourne, because I have an idea—perhaps quite unfounded—that the east wind blows perpetually there. Littlehampton is stupidly dull, and never suits me. Brighton is insufferable before November. Frank rather likes Littlehampton, I know. Let him go there, by all means, and let me go to Trouville, or Etretat—I don't mind which."

"He would not like you to go alone to either place, I am sure."

"No, he would not. That is just it, Dolly! Frank has grown ungenerous, and will not trust his wife."

"That must be a mistake, Queenie. Why should he distrust you?"

"Why, indeed? But the fact is, he is growing stupidly suspicious—*jealous*, I should say; only I hate the very word!"

"Queenie! To think of your accusing your own devoted husband of such a mean, vulgar defect!"

"Mean and vulgar, indeed! But Frank is not what he was. We women ought to have glass cases made for our husbands, wherein they can be placed immediately after the termination of the authorised honeymoon. The case should be hermetically sealed, that the good man may remain a bridegroom for ever and ever! My honeymoon lasted for an exceptionally long period, I must confess; but it has ended *now*. My adoring lover, who would once have moved heaven and earth to get me the moon in the skies, if I had cried for it, has changed into the imperious, exacting, not too sweet-tempered husband. He says *I flirt!*"

"And do you?"

"Of course not! I amuse myself a little; for life is monotonous at intervals, especially after you have been married seven long years and are the mother of three children, and one of them a miserable, plain—I was going to say *ugly*—little thing, of whom one cannot help being a little ashamed. Of course I cannot but know that I am still

a *Reine de la Beauté*. My glass tells me that, without the voice of flattery ; and, of course, I am frequently admired ! Men always will pay a certain attention to a really pretty, well-dressed woman—especially men of taste and refinement. One's husband gets accustomed to one's beauty as the months and years go on. He takes it as a matter of course, requiring no expressed acknowledgment. Now I do dearly love a certain amount of genuine admiration ; and what is beauty given to one for, save to exact a certain reverential homage ? Cannot you stay the evening, Dolly ? Dinner is ordered for seven precisely."

"No, dear ; I think not. I have a book that I have promised to finish reading to Philip and to the elders to-night. Father and mother have taken such a fancy for being read to. But I will come and dine with you one evening next week, if you please. I shall want to know how Frankie is going on, and how you have settled about Trouville. I think I must go now, for the light is failing, and it is quite a quarter of an hour's walk to Mortlake."

"Very well ! Then I shall expect you one day next week. There are several little things I wish to talk over with you. But love to mother and father, of course ; and a kiss from Auntie Regina to Baby Philip !"



CHAPTER XXXVII.

THE NURSERIES AT OAKENSHAW.

MRS. HOWARD did not allow Dolly to delay her promised visit ; for early in the ensuing week a letter arrived at "The Acacias," urging an immediate fulfilment of the engagement, as she might be setting off on her little seaside trip at very short notice.

"Come on Thursday," wrote Regina ; "I should say to-morrow, only we shall have Thursday all to ourselves ;

Frank is due—I am sure I forget exactly where—to attend a public dinner, to which he has been long promised ; so it will be a real charity if you will come to deserted Oakenshaw, and help me to eat mine ! Moreover, Thursday is the anniversary of the birth of my dear little twin-daughters, and if you would come to luncheon the darlings will be delighted ; they are always in raptures when Aunt Dolly is expected to visit the nursery ; and on Thursday, being such a red-letter day, we shall dine together at two o'clock—you and I, and the 'Misses Howard' ! Frank will be absent the whole day, for he has special business in town that will take him away from Oakenshaw at quite an early hour ; I shall not expect him back till the last train, when I hope I shall be in bed and fast asleep. I think of dispensing with the regular late dinner altogether. We will celebrate the birthday-banquet in good time ; then the children can join us about six or seven, at high-tea ; and I shall take a *petit souper* later on. I think you had better stay and partake with me, and Philip might come and escort you home ; he rather objects to suppers, I know ; but the journey from Clapham to Sheen will be sure to give him an appetite ; and I know we have some first-rate birds in the larder, just ready for the spit. And tell Phil, if he will only come, he shall have one of his favourite *transparent puddings* ! which, you know, my cook makes to perfection. There is a very nice pine, too, that really wants cutting, and will be over-ripe, I am sure, if it is left another day. My new pinery is a perfect success : we have abundance of fine fruit *coming on*. And I do want Phil's opinion on the grapes in the farthest hot-house ; and I don't believe he has tasted one of our Nonpareil nectarines all the year. Frank only patronises peaches."

Dolly carried the letter to her husband, putting it into his hand, and saying : " Well, dear, shall we accept ? There is no reason why we should not. I promised Queenie for this week ; and you have not been at Oakenshaw for many months."

" I suppose I shall not be expected to luncheon ? I am afraid I can hardly stand a whole day of my beloved sister's society, and Howard not at home."

"No ; I am pretty confident you will not be wanted to 'assist' at the luncheon in the middle of the day, which I fancy will be a grand banquet in honour of the twins' *jour de fête*. Queenie wants me all to herself, I know, and will welcome you either to 'high-tea' or to the *petit souper*, which bids fair to assume the character of an unusually late and *recherché* dinner ; as she says, the journey to Sheen, whether by road or by rail, will give you an excellent appetite."

"I shall dine very moderately, so as not to do flagrant injustice to Mrs. Howard's *petit souper*. We shall not be home much before midnight, I am afraid. Otherwise, if it had been only an affair of luncheon and nursery tea, I should have proposed your taking Ermyntrude."

"That is quite out of the question, for Queenie does not mention Ermy ; and I never presume to enlarge on any invitation of hers. Besides, that poor dear Frankie is ailing again, and though his mother never gives him credit for being more than slightly indisposed, I am always afraid of the recurrence of some serious and, perhaps, infectious malady. I do not care either for Ermy or Annie to be often at Oakenshaw ; indeed, the nursery atmosphere is not good for them in any way, I am persuaded. Feely and Dolly are darlings, or would be, if they were not so injuriously indulged ; but the *régime* at Oakenshaw is so entirely opposed to the *régime* of 'The Acacias' that I think it is only wise to limit the communication between the two nurseries as far as possible."

"You are right, dear, as you nearly always are. If Queenie would only transfer a little of the over-petting that she bestows on the twins to poor neglected Frankie, it would be much better for all parties. He was rather badly again last Friday, did you not say ?"

"I am afraid he was, though I did not see him. Queenie said he was only fretful, and her husband was fidgety, as he always is, if his son ails ever so little. I told you there was a talk about her going to Trouville or Etretat, or some other foreign watering-place, and Mr. Howard objects."

"I don't wonder ; my brilliant sister is always on the wing. As for her *toilettes*, they are beyond criticism, I suppose !

Although she is too much of a bird of paradise for my taste ; and really, my Dolly, I am quite thankful you do not share her passion for jewels. I could not afford it, and if you were so continually decked out like an oriental idol, I am afraid I should lose my respect for you."

"But, sir, I like jewellery—in moderation—and I do want a grand new locket for my birthday."

"And what you *wish*—in moderation—dearest, shall be granted. I like to see my wife well dressed, as becomes her station ; and her ornaments should be always good—the best of their kind—but not *too* numerous ! There is something absolutely barbaric, to my mind, in a superfluity of jewellery. The Howards are passing rich, I know, but I often wonder how Frank keeps up, in such first-rate style, that expensive establishment : house and grounds and servants ! horses and carriages ! Queenie's gorgeous apparel and her heaps and heaps of gold and gems, to say nothing of the *bric-a-brac-querie* that she has taken of late such a fancy for. Her china mania must be rather an expensive item."

"But you must remember, dear, Queenie went to her husband with thirty thousand pounds of her very own ! I only came to you with a modest five thousand ; and that is, after all, something taken from your future inheritance, as *my* marriage-portion came from your own father. And Queenie's fortune being so well invested brings her in not less than fifteen hundred a year ; no wonder she is sometimes tempted to be extravagant."

"She ought to save some of it for her children. That sickly boy of hers will want plenty of ready-made money, for he will never make any for himself. But, perhaps, I am somewhat hard on Queenie ; she would not have grown into such a selfish woman if she had been taught in her youth to restrain her vain-glorious inclinations, and to curb her ambitious will. Well, dear, write to her, accepting for yourself, as was your intention, and say that I will be with you about eight o'clock—perhaps a little earlier, that I may have time to kiss my pretty nieces, and wish them many happy returns of the day. What shall I take them for birthday presents ?"

"Queenie would say, give them *lockets* exactly alike."

"I will not foster a passion for the ornamental in such young children! I have often thought the first seeds of egregious vanity were sown in Queenie's young spirit with her sapphires, on her seventh birthday. No! the twins are quite too much of babies for *loquets*. I will be consistent, whether their mother will be or no; you shall go with me to the shop we wot of in Regent Street, and select two of the most beautiful *dolls*—ready dressed—that are offered for sale. Depend upon it, they will be more pleased with childish toys than with mere ornaments that will be nothing to them when the novelty is over. They may as well be satisfied with childish things while childhood lasts. Suppose you drive on to the Embankment this afternoon, and bring Ermy and Annie with you! I will be there, looking for you, and we will all go together and look for the dolls. Our little ones shall have something very pretty, of course; but they may as well learn betimes that they are not to require for themselves the *very* best."

And Dolly, with her little girls beside her, drove that afternoon to the appointed place, and found "papa" awaiting them, just outside the gate of the Temple; and then they went on to that veritable elysium of beautiful treasures that the young ladies had heard of, but never beholden with their own eyes; and they were made exceedingly happy by the presentation of sundry pretty but not too expensive playthings for "their very own selves." But they were encouraged to choose the two loveliest and most fashionably attired French dolls for their fortunate cousins. And on the Thursday, according to arrangement, Mrs. Philip Osborne kissed her own little daughters, and bade them be very good to Nurse, who was not very well—for old Nurse was still the nominal head of the nursery—and to be very quiet and obedient when they went to see grandpapa and grandmamma; and to take the greatest care of Baby Philip, and do all they could to amuse him if he cried.

"And give our best love and kisses to dear Feely and dear Dorofy!" cried Ermytrude, as her mother seated herself in the carriage.

"And say we wissed them 'happy returns' before we

dotted up ! ” wound up Miss Annette ; for neither of these young ladies was, as yet, expert in the English language. And then, with last adieux, Dolores Osborne drove away in the direction of East Sheen. Philip was to run down by rail, according to promise, and be at Oakenshaw as soon as possible after his own dinner ; and husband and wife were to return together after the “ *petit souper* .”

Dolly arrived at her destination about one o’clock, and the dolls were presented and received by the twins with unrepressed delight, and they showed, with great satisfaction, the numerous gifts they had received in acknowledgment of their natal day.

“ For we are five years old ,” explained Felicia, as she eyed approvingly the elegant juvenile costume which she wore for the first time in honour of the occasion.

“ Five years old—*to-day* ! ” amended Dorothy, who evidently thought her twin-sister’s information to be insufficiently lucid. They were very pretty children, with graceful little figures, fairy-like hands and feet, lovely complexions, and delicate, regular features. Their voices, too, were sweet and silvery, and they spoke so exactly alike that it was quite impossible to tell without a glance which of them was actually speaking. They were very much given, too, to expressing their ideas almost simultaneously, only Dorothy was just a trifle more accurate than Felicia, who was the elder by almost an hour.

They had their mother’s lovely golden hair—soft, silky, and waving ; and they inherited her fascinating smile, and the innocent dimples in cheek and chin, and on the rounded wrist, which so eminently distinguished Felicia Regina Dorothea. But their eyes, though blue as the sky, were not like hers—not like purple violets or sapphires, with now and then the hyacinthine lustre, or, as some said, the amethystine gleam, in their wondrous depths. As Jonathan Osborne used to observe in earlier years, “ I do believe there are positively not a dozen people in all the world with such unspeakably beautiful eyes as my daughter Queenie ! ” .

And, certainly, they were not repeated in the case of Queenie’s little girls, though they were undeniably lovely children, and sweet-tempered and docile enough to satisfy

the most exacting of mothers. Regina Howard was undoubtedly very proud of her twin-daughters.

At two o'clock punctually the bell-gong sounded through the great echoing house, and Felicia extended her little plump white hand to her aunt, while Dorothy took her mother's hand. "For *we* are going to dine with you to-day, auntie!" was the duet-like observation of the little ladies.

Mrs. Philip Osborne was no sooner seated than she noticed that the table was laid only for four; Frankie, then, was not expected to be present.

"Is not Frankie coming down? I thought he was better," inquired Dolly, when all were served, and the toast, in honour of the twins, had been duly drunk.

"Frankie?" replied Mrs. Howard. "Oh, dear, no! Anything, not quite in the ordinary way, upsets him directly; the plainest fare always suits him the best. The last time he dined down stairs he had a regular bilious attack, and the week after he had scarlatina, and the twins had to be sent away, with Aunt Mary, to Littlehampton. It was an affair, indeed, disinfecting the nurseries—and, really, the whole house."

"But the dinner, even though it disagreed with the child, would scarcely give him scarlatina. I should think the malady must have been something more than impending, when the supposed bilious attack came on."

"Perhaps so. The only safe way is to keep him on very simple food; we give him, chiefly, tender mutton, and rice pudding, and sago, and semolina, and similar things. And he can take a little chicken, without made-gravy, or bread-sauce; and Dr. Morrison does not object to a very light custard-pudding, eaten with preserve, or something sweet and wholesome. These little women, I am glad to say, can eat anything, without being at all the worse for it. They have the most excellent digestions; though, of course, the nursery dinner is not a feast like we have to-day. I do not hold with children being over-fed, or richly-fed—it is so bad for their complexions. Dorothy, my darling, do not take any more of that gravy; and Felicia, dearest, you had better not ask for any more partridge."

"They have very healthy appetites, certainly," responded

Dolly, who thought the little girls had had quite enough for that one course ; especially as plum-pudding, and almond-custard, and dessert were to follow. She did not approve, either, of such children being encouraged to drink wine ; in her estimation, they were very much better without it.

Dinner being concluded, and the twins feasted on grapes and bananas, the dolls were carried about the drawing-room, in state, for a little while ; and then it was proposed that the children should return to the nursery, till six o'clock, when tea would be served, and they were to come down for their final meal. For Queenie, as a rule, was most strict in enforcing early hours ; they must be in bed, and, if possible, asleep, by seven o'clock : for the benefit of their constitutions ; for the development of their growth ; and, above all, for their *complexions*. For Mrs. Howard attached the utmost importance to a complexion clear and brilliant, such as she herself possessed.

"Now let us have our quiet talk," began Queenie, when all had left the room, save herself and her sister-in-law. "You have brought your work with you ? What an industrious, thrifty little soul you are, Dolly. What are you toiling at now ?"

"I am embroidering this breadth of crimson cashmere for a winter frock for my baby, and, as you know, I have never too much time on my hands."

"Nor I either. I am always giving orders, or receiving company, or paying calls, or superintending alterations of some kind. I am a dreadfully busy person, I assure you ; though Frank thinks I never do a thing that is useful—I just amuse myself, and nothing more ! But that is always the way with husbands ; they never give their wives credit for real activity or thrift. But I hate needlework of any kind ; I just keep a scrap of art-work to be on my hands on particular occasions. One doesn't exactly care to be the only idle person in a room full of workers. It is the height of fashion now to be absorbed in a wild rose or a sunflower or something of the sort. But I shall take a holiday to-day, Dolly, and look on while you manipulate your filosel. I have a little weakness, you know, for the *dolce far niente* ! I always sympathise fully with the 'lilies of the field,' who

toil not, neither do they spin, and yet make the most perfectly charming appearance."

"But people who are not as rich as you are, Queenie, *must* 'toil and spin,' to some extent, if they wish to look at all nicely. And I do enjoy this sort of embroidery that you can always utilise for your children. And one may just as well keep one's fingers employed as let them lie idly in one's lap, or pinch one's laces, or torment one's rings."

"But so much needlework tries your sight, I am persuaded; though I do think dark eyes like yours are a world stronger than mine, which I sometimes fancy are made principally for looking about me and for ornament. How nimbly you ply that needle and silk of yours; you might be a sempstress, working for so much a day! Oh, by the way, Dolly, you have not asked me about Trouville?"

"Have you decided to go or stay at home?"

"It has been decided for me. I am *not* to cross the Channel. 'My master' does not approve of my appearing unattended at the *table d'hôte*, nor of my pervading the *Etablissement* generally without him at my side to keep me in order, and to warn off presumptuous admirers who have the bad taste to pronounce me undeniably—*pretty*! But Trouville is not the question now, nor Etretat, nor Granville, nor anywhere else—over the way. He has promised to take me to Brighton, though, next month, *if* I am a good girl, and if Frankie is not too ill—which means *too cross* to be left to the care of servants."

"What constitutes your being 'a good girl' for the time being?"

"Obeying my master, of course. Dolly, what would you do if you had decided to give a first-class dinner-party, and had even settled what the courses were to be, and drawn up the *menu*—subject, of course, to revisions; suppose some of the guests knew they were to be invited; suppose you had the loveliest dress in the world that you had never worn, and a set of ornaments of unequalled design, and quite unique; and suppose Philip absolutely forbade you to issue the invitations—what *would* you do, Dolly?"

"I should not give it, of course. My husband would not issue a prohibition without some most satisfactory reason. But does Frank really object to your proposed dinner-party?"

"He really does! And I am extremely annoyed, Dolly. I tell him plainly that I married to have my own way, as mistress of the house!—not to be subject to my husband's irrational caprices; not to be confronted with a relentless *veto*, whenever I had just formed a cherished plan. But I am determined not to be beaten! I never was beaten, as a girl, you know. I made my father turn that dancing-party into a regular ball! I had my way—though I had a little struggle for it—in every particular, save the card tables. Now, I will not be beaten in my own house; cards don't go with a dinner-party, so I do not want them; but I do want my 'dinner-party'—and I mean to have it."

"What will you do?"

"Just take my own way—be true to myself. Persevere!—persist!—steadily adhere to my determination, though I am rebuffed five hundred times. What! a married woman denied permission to please herself in her own house? It is simply monstrous! Frank is fast turning into an *austere* tyrant, and if he go much further in his autocratic rule—I shall just *hate* him."

"That I am sure you will not! You have given a great many dinner-parties since you came home to Oakenshaw; why does Mr. Howard object so strenuously to this one in particular? On the whole, he is certainly a very hospitable man; unless he be wondrously changed, he likes nothing better than entertaining."

"But he is changed! I told you so the other day; I am out of all patience with him. I gave him to understand, before I would consent to being publicly '*engaged*,' that I should always expect to have my own way, in trifles as well as in essentials. And I did not come to him empty-handed, as you know very well; and I have certainly a right to spend my own money in my own way—now, have I not?"

"I cannot reply in an unqualified affirmative, for I do not think a married woman has a right to spend her own money, or to withhold it, contrary to her husband's desire. And I

should fancy, Queenie, this affair is not exactly a question of money."

"I cannot say it is ; and if you had the smallest sympathy in your nature—which I am beginning to be afraid you have not—I would tell you plainly where the shoe pinches. You ought not to take the stronger side, Dolly ; it is un-womanly."

"Is it ? But do I take the stronger side, Queenie ?"

"You side with husbands generally—with my husband especially. We women are the weaker side, because we cannot get our way without fighting for it. You, as a matron, ought to take the matron's part. I, as a matron, am defrauded of my right to ask whom I will to my table ; you, as a matron, ought to encourage me in the defiance of a husband's tyranny. There is something so contemptible in simple obedience ; subjection is not my *métier*, and never will be."

And there were tears in Queenie's sapphire eyes, and the angry flush on her dimpled cheek rivalled that of "the red, red rose," that grew close at hand, in Mrs. Howard's conservatory—if not just then at Ellerslie.

"What really is the difficulty ?" asked Dolly, rather nervously, laying down her embroidery. "You seem to me to be actually at feud with Frank. What has he done to offend you, to estrange you so completely ? You are angry, dear, on some account ; and I know of old you can be *very* angry if you are actually annoyed—'put about,' as Nurse used to say when we both were little ones. But, Queenie, dear, you *love* your husband, though he may have piqued you ; I am as perfectly assured of that as I am of my affection for my own Philip. Don't vex Frank ; he is too good, too kind, too generous, to be estranged."

"He may be estranged, if it please him to be estranged. You are mistaken, Dolly ; one woman—one wife, cannot always judge for another. I do not love Frank Howard !"

"*Queenie !*" And Dolly let fall the crimson cashmere and the shades of silk in sheer consternation. "It is a terrible thing to hear a woman—and that woman one's own dear sister—say that she does not love her wedded husband—the man whom she is pledged to love and to reverence

while life lasts. You do not, cannot, mean what you say, Queenie."

"I do mean it, Dolly; I mean it indubitably; and I more than *say* I do not love Frank—I *protest* it! He has forfeited the affection I once bestowed on him."

"But you did love him a very little while ago? And one cannot love and unlove at pleasure, can they?"

"Yes, they can; at least, *I* can. I loved Frank in my girlish, almost childish, simplicity, because he seemed to love me; and vowed that I should do exactly as I pleased! Now, he does not love me, for he will not let me do as I please—he thwarts me at every turn, and I never could bear to be thwarted."

"He does love you, Queenie! loves you as few women are privileged to be loved in this mutable world, and this too fickle nineteenth century. And—we must *all* submit to be thwarted on occasion; a true woman's happiness lies in obedience."

"You are made of meeker, milder stuff than I am! The lesson of obedience is one I never learned. Perhaps I *might* obey, and obey uncompromisingly, the *man of my choice*!"

"And Frank is the man of your choice, most assuredly."

"No; he is not."

"Whose choice, then? Who influenced you to accept Mr. Howard as your betrothed?"

"You did, for one person! My father and mother did; all my brothers did. He was the choice of my family—not mine!"

"Queenie! this is something rather worse than nonsense. You may be angry, if you choose; but I will not speak smooth words at such a crisis. If Frank were not your choice—your sole unbiassed choice, as we all know he was, in spite of every asseveration—how dared you take him for your husband at the marriage-altar?"

"I tell you, he is not what he was; he is no longer my friend, indulgent lover, he is——"

"He is your husband, Queenie! He is more; he is the father of your children."

"I sometimes wish he were not! My darling girls are

my closest tie to Oakenshaw ; but for them, I do not know to what rashness I might be tempted. But you understand, Dolly, that this conversation is entirely between ourselves ! it is not to be repeated to mother, nor to father, nor to your own husband ; you promise ?”

“I promise so far as our mother and father are concerned ; the report would only pain them. But I cannot pledge myself any further, for I have never kept a secret from my husband ; so, if you have any confidence to repose in me, Queenie, that he may not share, you had better—far better—withhold it.”

“Since you are ungracious enough to make such a reservation, Dolly, I think I had better keep my own counsel. But I am disappointed—most bitterly disappointed—for I thought it would be such a comfort to tell you all my troubles. I think, if you will excuse me, I will lie down on my favourite sofa, and try if I cannot sleep for a quarter of an hour ; I am very tired, and I am depressed. I shall not be in spirits to entertain the twins when they come downstairs ; and I want the little dears thoroughly to enjoy themselves to-day. It is getting so dusk ; I am sure you cannot see properly, and you will confuse your shades. Suppose you lean back in that comfortable easy-chair, and get a little repose, by way of refreshment.”

“Thank you ; I think I will go to the nursery while you rest yourself, if you have no objection. I have some special and private messages from Ermy and Annie ; and I have not seen Frankie for quite an age.”

“Oh ! go by all means ; the children will be only too delighted to have you in the gloaming, which they like almost as well as you do, I believe. For my own part, I detest this half-light that is neither one thing nor the other ; unless, indeed, I can sleep through it, and then I do not mind. You will find the whole house as bright as bright can be, when you leave the nursery ; I wish we had the electric light, it is so much better than any other. But, Dolly, don't let Susan see that you are thinking Frankie any worse than usual ; for I do believe he is paler and thinner than when you saw him last—in the beginning of the summer, if I do not err.”

And as Queenie nestled among the downy cushions of her luxurious couch, and closed her eyes, Mrs. Philip Osborne took her way to another part of the house shut off from the rest by double doors, at one end of the long, wide corridor. When the baize door was closed, Dolly found herself in quite another world ; she was in the western wing, and that was devoted to pleasant and spacious nurseries, which were the habitation of the children and their attendants. The first rooms in the suite were devoted to the twins—and to Deborah and Rachel, their maids ; and a great deal of merriment seemed to be going on on the other side of the door of the airy play room, where the Misses Howard considered themselves privileged to make all the noise and racket they thought proper.

Dolly would have liked a romp with her little nieces very well ; but she went on, past the play room, and the twins' night nursery, and past one or two other rooms, which seemed unoccupied—quite to the end of the long passage, where the dying glow of sunset still lingered on the pictured walls. Here there were two rooms that seemed quite apart from the others ; and the first of these was the one Mrs. Philip sought. She tapped very lightly, and entered. Nurse—"the ancient nurse," as her mistress styled her—was sitting here, and knitting by such light as yet remained. She rose when Dolly entered, and greeted her respectfully, offering her the old-cushioned rocking-chair that stood by the smouldering fire ; for these apartments, dedicated solely to the use of little Frankie, knew nothing of empty grates, save in the warmest and most sunshiny days of the summer-tide.

"I have come to see Frankie," said Mrs. Osborne, when she had inquired after Susan's health. "I suppose I can go in and speak to him ?" For the little invalid lay in the inner room, on a couch provided especially for him, except upon such days—which, alas ! were rarer and rarer—when it was not deemed altogether inexpedient to remove him.

"I almost think he is asleep, ma'am," answered Susan, in a whisper ; "but I'll look in and see. He will be awake presently."

"And how is he, Susan ?"

"Well, ma'am, I can't think he's the least bit better ; and the doctor, he thinks him worse. He is weaker, I am sure ; and the disease that has been so long developing is almost certainly in the spine, or connected with it somehow. Then the cough is as bad as ever ; and lately"—in a still more subdued voice—"those dreadful fits have come again ; and I think—and I am pretty sure the doctor thinks with me—that they are the beginning of the end."

"Mrs. Howard said he was ailing more than usual, but she thinks the right system is not pursued with him."

"I know she does ; but, ma'am, she has never seen him at the worst ; she has no idea what a frail bit of life the poor little lad has to cling to. And she thinks I cosset him too much ; but all the cosseting he gets is from me, though Mr. Frank does make much of him, and would move the whole heaven and earth, if it lay with him, to give him a little ease and just a little strength. His ma doesn't like sick rooms, as we've all heard her say many a time ; but it's wonderful how he looks for her if he thinks there is a chance of her coming into his room."

"Does she come often ? "

"She did use to come, ma'am, every day, and sometimes twice a day ; but for the last three or four months she hasn't come so regularly—not since she came back from that place anigh Paris—the place where they play the great fountains, I mean, though I can't think of the name,—she has not come to the end nursery near so often. She comes as far as the young ladies' rooms, but no further ; her nerves won't stand it, she says to Deborah and Rachel, who look after the little girls."

"They are quite strong, and very well, are they not, Susan ? "

"As well as well can be, ma'am. And they are hearty little things, and have scarcely known a day's illness. Dear me, they got their teeth with scarce a bit of trouble ; I don't believe either Deborah or Rachel, who have been with them ever since they were quite babies, have ever known what it was to have a real bad night with them. I don't grudge them their fine unbroken health, the darlings—the good Lord knows ! But it do seem hard that all

the health, and strength, and beauty, too, should have come to them and none at all to my poor dear lamb, who has been ailing almost from his birth. I am most minded to ask God to take him to rest, sometimes ; though I should miss him sore ; and his pa would take it terribly hard if he was took. Yes, my darling—I'm coming ! ”

A thin, piping little voice was heard, calling hoarsely, “ Susan ! Susan ! ” and the old woman hurried into the next room, and found her charge awake, and a little relieved after his sleep. “ And here's your dear Auntie Dolly come to see you,” she went on, after she had administered some beef-tea, and arranged his pillows. “ Would you like to see auntie, my boy ? ”

“ Oh, yes ! ” replied the weak voice. “ Please bring her ; Feely told me she was here ; and I was just thinking I had been dreaming about her. Is Ermy come ? ”

“ No, dear ; none of the little cousins came—only auntie. Would you please to come in, Mrs. Philip ? Frankie is quite himself to-night. ”

And in another minute, Dolly stood by the couch of the invalid. His eyes were very bright, but glassy, and his thin cheeks were flushed with the repose he had just enjoyed. He seemed weaker than when last his aunt had seen him ; and he made only the feeblest attempt to raise himself as she approached.

“ Oh ! auntie, dear, I am so glad you came to see me ; I thought you would come, if it were only for a few minutes. But why did you not bring Ermy ? ”

“ It was not convenient to bring her to-day, dear ; but she is quite well, and bade me give you her love, and a great many kisses. And she hoped you might be a little better than you were when she was here last. ”

“ I am about the same, auntie, tell her ; only, I can't sit up for more than a minute, without my back hurting me so. And Susan says, if I don't make haste and improve I shall be just a bag of bones. ”

“ Do you get out-of-doors, at all ? ”

“ Oh, yes ; I go into the grounds whenever the weather is fine enough. I don't walk, you know ; Dr. Morrison thinks I had better not try while my back is so weak. But Susan

and old Watson carry me down on this couch, and it is very pleasant. I was in the shrubbery last week, and on the lower lawn last week ; and soon, as it gets colder and duller, I am to be taken into the large greenhouse that papa has had made into a sort of winter garden. It's not too hot, you know, but very comfortable, and full of the loveliest flowers."

"I am so glad the greenhouse is ready for you, dear, for we shall have wintry weather very soon. Your papa told me he was having it enlarged very much on your account. He said you would be able to be there all through the chilly season, if you kept pretty well ; for it is so good for you to have change of air and scene. And your sisters can come to you sometimes."

"Yes ; and there is a covered way now just under the great cedar-tree. It was so kind of papa to think of his poor weak little boy, and take all the trouble on purpose that he might get out even in bad weather. And it will do for Feely and Dolly, even if I don't want it for long."

"Do you think you may not want it long, Frankie, dear ?"

"I *think* I'm going to die pretty soon. I mean Jesus will send for me, and take me up to that 'better land' that you sang about once, Aunt Dolly. I sha'n't be tired then, and I sha'n't want to be carried like a baby any longer. Papa has told me all about Jesus Christ, and how He loves even little children ; and I do want to be with Him. And I can't be with Him if I am not like Him, papa says ; but I do try to be patient and *wait* till He sends His bright Angel of Death for me. Perhaps He will come *Himself*. Do you think He might, Aunt Dolly ?"

"Yes, darling ; I do think He is very likely to come and take His little tired lamb in His own kind arms. Only, go on to love Him, Frankie, dear, and ask Him to help you bear the pain and make you patient. There will be no sorrow of any kind there, you know, in the dear Lord's own Heaven, when in His own good time He will take you."

And Dolly choked down the emotion that threatened to overpower her. Frankie was greatly changed since last they had talked together ; he was not only thin to attenuation,

but pitifully weak, and his aunt felt quite convinced that but for the tenderest ministrations his little spirit must ere this have passed away. And now it would not be long ere the strife and suffering terminated. It was impossible to look on the sweet childish face and not see on it the signet of Heaven—the impress of the perfect peace that was very near at hand.

“I wonder if I shall see him again?” said Dolly, as she wiped away her thick-coming tears, in the outer room. “It seems to me, Susan, he is going—going fast!”

“And the mistress won’t believe it. The doctor thinks, ma’am, he *may* get through the winter, with care—the greatest of care, you know! But if those fits come on again—a sort of convulsive fits, that have to do as much with the brain as with the spine, I should say—he’ll be gone directly.”

“Yes, Susan! gone ‘past night, past day!’ And we will thank the dear Lord, who takes him to Himself, for great will be the dear child’s gain.”

When Dolly told Queenie very plainly that her boy was quietly dying, she seemed startled, and even grieved; but she rejoined that he had been “like that,” on and off, for several years, and might, after all, outgrow his many infirmities. She had hopes, even yet, that he might survive to manhood; “children had such elastic constitutions!”

But when Philip, a little later, saw the child, the medical experience which he had gained in earlier years assured him that the end was not far off. He told Queenie that if the fits did not recur, life might be lengthened, for some months, even now; but any return of the convulsive attacks might be—and probably would be—quickly fatal. The little girls, however, he assured his sister, were remarkably healthy, and promised to develop both superior beauty and genius. She need have little solicitude about them; they only needed plenty of air, and plenty of sleep, wholesome food, and not too much indulgence, to ensure a continuation of the splendid *physique* they already enjoyed.

“But,” continued Philip, as he and his wife drove back to Clapham Common, “that poor little Frankie’s days are numbered I feel persuaded. It will be a terrible blow to

his father, for he is wrapped up in this only son ; and I know he thinks a little more motherly care and devotion *might* prolong his life, which has really been hanging on a thread ever since he was born. Strange that constitutions so robust and vigorous, as are both Frank's and Queenie's, should be represented by such an ailing, sickly heir as this poor little weakling. Though old Susan does say that Frank, as a baby, was anything but healthy."

"And that makes Queenie all the more confident that her boy will even yet 'outgrow' all his delicacy!"

"He never will! I thought he might, myself; but the return of these fits prove that the disease has made stealthy but terrible inroads, that cannot much longer be stayed."

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

QUEENIE DECLINES BRIGHTON.

QUEENIE," said Frank Howard, about a fortnight later, "I find that I can go down with you to Brighton early next week, and I can spare ten, or, perhaps, twelve days."

"I should not care for ten or twelve days! I did not particularly wish for Brighton at all this season, as you know; but if I did go I should choose it to be a little later. I have half promised for the Pavilion Ball, and that is in November."

"But November will not suit me on several accounts. I should not go anywhere if I consulted my own convenience, for my uncle is far from well, and I am anxious about him. But you seem to be hankering after 'a change,' Queenie, and I do not want you to be disappointed."

"I am not *hankering* after what you call 'a change,' that is, *as* a change; but I had quite settled to go to Etretat or

Trouville; and to that pleasant little expedition you decidedly object."

"As I explained to you, Queenie, I cannot very well be absent from England at this time. Do be reasonable, my dear, and be content with Brighton for a short time. You used to be so fond of Brighton until lately, and I think, and so many people think, there is no place like Brighton in October."

"I am not going to Brighton, unless it be in November, just for the Pavilion Ball. I am set upon Trouville—it is the queen of watering-places, in my estimation; there is no seaside resort at once so pleasant and so gay—one does not waste one's *toilettes* there."

"I do not like Trouville, Queenie—I cannot approve of it. Where is the felicity of making five *toilettes* daily? What can be the pleasure of bathing *en costume* in public—dancing figure-dances in the open sea?"

"The pleasure is very great to me; but I shall not try to explain, as I am tolerably sure you would not by any means understand. But I can make no engagement of any kind for next week, for I am going out with Mrs. Macnamara."

"Where are you going, dear, with that woman whom I so cordially dislike?"

"And whom I so thoroughly appreciate! We have little plans of our own. We so much enjoy each other's society—she is really my most intimate friend."

"I am sorry to hear it, for I am sure she is not a good woman."

"She is by no means what may be called a 'goody-goody' person—but she is good enough for me. She is full of spirit and fun—she is what my Aunt Rachel would call 'very good company.' She and I get on together capitally; I am always on the best terms with myself when I have talked with her for a little while."

"I wish you would not make engagements with her, of all people!"

"Why not, Mr. Howard?"

"You know perfectly well that she is not a desirable companion for you. My wife, and your father's daughter ought not to be seen with a person of doubtful character."

She may be actually unblemished perhaps, or she may not she gives herself quite too much licence, Queenie ; she is so careless that she may well be classed with the *demi-monde*, upon occasion ! ”

“How dare you say so ! How scandalous society is ! You know perfectly, Frank, she is a respectable married woman.”

“That she is married, I am well aware ; but she does not live with her husband, and a woman who is separated from her husband is always under disadvantage.”

“According to the charitable interpretation of a certain set of sanctimonious individuals who set themselves up for being ever so much better than their neighbours ! But Leonora could not live with that stupid old curmudgeon whom she was so imprudent as to marry. I am sure I could not live with *you* if you were even one-half as disagreeable as the man whose name she is unfortunate enough to bear ! ”

“Queenie, I know more than you do of Mrs. Macnamara’s character and reputation in various quarters ; and, believe me, she is by no means an eligible associate for a young and beautiful woman like yourself. One cannot touch pitch, and entirely escape defilement ! Your Leonora will work you no good, I am well assured ; be persuaded, my Queenie, and give up the intimacy, lest people should say unkind things, and declare that ‘birds of a feather flock together ! ’ ”

“People may say what they please. I am not going to desert *my* friend because some of your methodistical, stupid, prudish friends choose to indulge in vulgar scandal. Once for all, Mr. Howard, I am not going to give up Leonora for you, or for any of your dull old fogies, who are too precise and stiff to take an innocent joke as it is meant. I have yielded too much already ; I am cheated out of Trouville—out of my brilliant little dinner-party—out of a hundred things on which I had set my heart ! Take care, Frank, and do not exact too much ! I warn you that obedience is not and never was my *rôle*. I am not made of milk-and-water stuff, like many women, who are content to do as they are bid, and have no will of their own. I am not like my brothers’ inestimable wives, who never dream of opposing

their lawful husbands ! I am not like Dolly, who, I believe, does not understand what it is to go her own way, or to please herself independently. She—poor little soul!—does not know what it is to rebel against the powers that be. She goes on, year by year, pursuing the even tenor of her way, and doing her duty according to her own lights. She is content with her own sphere, among her own people, and aspires to nothing higher—nothing more exciting. She thinks herself quite dissipated if she attend a few Dorcas meetings or go to a Congregational tea-fight that finishes up with a few witty speeches and a little sacred music. I know for a fact that she has not been at a single ball since her marriage. That is the sort of woman *you* should have married, Frank—a sweet-tempered, docile, meek, unambitious woman such as she is !”

“I had rather have my own wife than any one else. With all her faults, I would not change her if I might, for any other woman in the world. But, Queenie, you say I am always wanting you to give up something. I do ask you to give up this scheme of yours, whatever it may be, if it involves your appearing in public with Mrs. Macnamara. I cannot—must not—allow my wife to associate intimately with people who, perhaps, do not *intend* to act improperly, but who yet go to the very verge of compromising their good names. One thing more, dearest—write to Mrs. Leonora and say that you are going down to Brighton with me very early in the week ; that our rooms are already secured at the *Grand*.”

“But they are not, and need not be, as far as I am concerned. My appointment is with Leonora and her friends, and I shall keep it. I will not be faithless to my word for any man—be he husband or no husband.”

“Who are Leonora’s friends ?”

“That is more than I can tell you. Some of them are my friends, of course, for I am very much in her set ; but she knows many persons whom I do not know, and whom I should not care to know, to whom, perhaps, I shall not care to speak.”

“What are you going to do ? Where have you arranged to spend the evening ?”

"I wish you would ask one question at a time. I suppose we are going to have some music, and I dare say we shall dance, and perhaps sit down to a game of cards. There is no harm in cards, certainly, though you disapprove of them, and I find little pleasure in them."

"But where do you hold your assembly?"

"That I cannot tell you, for I do not know myself. Leonora's rooms are quite too small for anything. It is perfectly respectable, and by no means singular, to prefer a room at some first-rate hotel. Now you really must excuse me, for all this time I am afraid that unlucky dressmaker of mine is waiting for me."

"One word more, Queenie—the dressmaker can wait a little longer—is Count Alexis Von Langen to be of the party?"

"Of course he is! he is Leonora's most intimate friend! Ah, Frank, there is the real secret of your uneasiness; you do not care for me to meet Alexis—you are *jealous*! and that is at the root of all this silly fuss about Leonora. It is *Alexis* of whom you actually disapprove."

"I do disapprove of Von Langen—I disapprove of him so entirely and completely that I am determined he shall not be invited to my table."

"I thought the lady of the house was supposed to issue her own invitations—that the 'table,' so to speak, was at her disposal."

"I ought to have said *our* table. Issue what invitations you please, Queenie; but understand I reserve to myself a certain power of limitation as concerns the guests whom you wish to invite. And the rule should apply to both sides of the house; if I have any name down on my list, lady or gentleman, it is only your just prerogative to decline to receive such a person, if you in any way object. If our dinner-party had taken place, as you had arranged, I am afraid—nay, I am tolerably sure—that the majority of our personal friends would consider themselves insulted."

"I do not see why. What is Alexis to them, and what are they to Alexis? I consider him an extremely charming man, and I have certainly a right to my own individual preferences! One might as well be an Eastern slave, bound to

obey the supreme will of her lord and master, whose *property* she is—as bear the injustice of a suspicious and jealous husband.”

“I am not jealous, Queenie ; I would not indulge so injurious a sentiment. You are my true and faithful and most honourable wife ! but you will not hear reason ; you will listen to foolish counsel. You are too credulous, my dear, and, I must say it, you are too wilful, and—*far too vain !*”

“Thank you, *M. mon Mari !* When I wish for compliments I must not expect to receive them from my own husband. Perhaps I have more than most women to be vain of ! I know that I am beautiful—it would be pure affectation to deny it, or even to question it. Mr. Howard, you should have married a girl of only ordinary charms ; men of your temperament are unfitted to be the husband of a Helen or a Cleopatra ! Alexis admires me, I know ; and I must say I admire him.”

“Take care, Queenie, how far you allow him to perceive your admiration. He is fairly good-looking, I suppose, and he is brilliant and accomplished, as foreigners so often are. But I am by no means sure that he is all he professes to be. Remember your experiences of ten years ago ; you were infatuated with a *Count* then, and you know with what result !”

“The reminiscences of the past have nothing at all to do with the present, Mr. Howard, and you ought to be ashamed to insinuate such a suggestion. The man Stanger was a most doubtful personage, to make the best of it ; but you know yourself that Alexis Von Langen is no impostor.”

“I do not know it ; neither do you ! He is not trying to pass under an assumed name ; he is of good family ; his people are reputable enough, so far as I can ascertain ; but there are adventurers in every rank of life ! And I must request you will not speak of him as ‘Alexis’ ; you have no right to call by his Christian name a man who is in no way related to you—who is only a recent acquaintance, of whose antecedents you know very little.”

“There is no rule for friendships ; you know some men and some women for a lifetime, yet never feel drawn

towards them. Again, the acquaintance of an hour ripens into genuine friendship and esteem ; and a certain familiarity is inevitable."

"I do not believe, myself, in sudden friendships. I am afraid I am unsentimental enough to disbelieve in what is commonly called falling in love ! Am I to understand that the individual referred to has the insufferable impertinence to call you by your Christian name ?"

"He calls me *la bella Regina* ! you do not suppose he is ceremonious enough to accost me as 'Mrs. Howard,' especially when we are in *le petit comité*. Of course, I do not permit him to call me 'Queenie,' but he calls Mrs. Macnamara *Leonora*, and Mrs. Tregenna Tregonel *Amoretta* !"

"I know nothing of Mrs. Tregenna-Tregonel, though I believe I have been introduced to her, as you would say, *en passant* ; but Mrs. Macnamara is, as you observed yourself, a married woman, and ought not to be spoken to, except by her matronly prefix. I greatly dislike this fashion of flinging aside all decent formalities, which prevails so much now, among a certain set of people. There is much truth in the old adage, 'Familiarity breeds contempt.'"

"There is much truth in a great many things, and a great deal of untruth, as well. One thing is certain, my dear, you are a good, prosy, old-fashioned English gentleman, with the common English prejudice against foreigners, and against their peculiarities ; and you are so naturally conservative that you instinctively set your face against social changes, however trivial. Nevertheless, Frank, I won't quarrel with you—it's bad taste for married people to quarrel, since quarrelling always argues a certain littleness of mind. Go your way ; and unless you presume very far indeed, I shall not find fault with you—we all have our own opinions, or ought to have ! And if you are wise you will not inquire too closely into my little affairs—content yourself when I assure you they are quite harmless. I simply want to amuse myself."

"I should have thought you might amuse yourself sufficiently in your own family, and in your own circle. I do

believe, firmly, that you neither see nor suspect harm in any of your diversions ; but, Queenie, a married woman should not pursue diversions apart from her husband—she should not have friends who are not also his. She may go her own way a little too far, till she may rue the day, when, in her innocence, but folly, she set out on the doubtful journey.”

“Thank you for the exordium ; I will try to remember what you say ; I will go no farther than I ought to go. I will never forget that I am Regina Howard—do not be afraid for me. And now I *must* go ! I give up Trouville for the present, and the dinner-party, with the best grace I can !—let that content you. And I decline to accompany you next week to Brighton, but intend to keep my appointment with Leonora.”

And, having declared her domestic policy as openly as seemed expedient, Queenie escaped from the room, and ran gaily to the little parlour, where the patient dressmaker awaited her patroness.

And now you will wonder what *were* Mrs. Howard's plans for the coming week, and why she should obstinately refuse to accompany her husband to the very place she had told all her friends, not a year ago, was the most charming autumn-resort in all England, and scarcely inferior to any spot in Europe.

The fact was, Queenie had of late identified herself with “a new and very delightful set of people.” She had adopted, to a large extent, the manners of the fast women and frisky matrons with whom, unluckily, she had become too intimate. She had met Mrs. Macnamara at Granville the year before ; and the two had, with startling rapidity, set up what Frank called a “mushroom acquaintance,” which ripened quickly into a semi-fashionable, semi-sentimental “eternal friendship.” Leonora Macnamara was, as we mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, a married woman, with plenty of diplomacy, plenty of wit—a sort of charm that very often took unsuspecting people by storm—and not by any means with too much of this world's possessions.

For “Leonora” was separated from her husband ; they

had parted by mutual consent—he for certain reasons of his own, she because her marriage had “not answered.” She was gay, and thoughtless, and extravagant; he was parsimonious, yet extravagant in pleasures of which she disapproved. He complained of “incompatibility of temper,” that fruitful source of endless dissension; she mourned that he was unkind, unfaithful, and at times intemperate; and the result was, that each elected to pursue a different course; she retaining a small portion of the handsome fortune she had once brought him; he agreeing to make no further demand on her property or on herself; she would go her way, he would go his, and neither would blame the other. They were legally “separated”; but neither man nor woman was free to enter into fresh marriage engagements. They met so seldom that Leonora was not always sure that her unsatisfactory husband was in the land of the living; while he contrived to discover pretty frequently her precise “whereabouts,” to know how she conducted or misconducted herself; to keep himself fairly informed of her state of health and her manner of life, as he always intended to make far other arrangements should death sever the lawful union, or should Leonora so far forget herself as to justify him in suing for something beyond a legal separation.

Leonora's chief friend was a kindred spirit with herself. She was the Mrs. Tregenna-Tregonel before referred to—a lady, not very handsome, but very clever, and answering to the Spenserian name of “Amoretta.” Queenie thought her a very delightful woman, though *daring*, even in her estimation, and, sometimes, “almost vulgar.” Now and then she certainly passed all bounds, and assumed a licence which would utterly have compromised her in anything like select society. Some people said she was a widow; others asserted that she was a *divorcée*; but no one, save Leonora, and perhaps one or two others, knew exactly *who* “Amoretta” was, or whether she had any real right to the respectable sounding name of Tregenna-Tregonel! Had Frank Howard even remotely guessed the true character of this doubtful personage, who gave herself out as a poetess and a “literary woman” of pronounced

opinions, and not too squeamish notions, he would certainly have locked up his wife, or carried her away to the Antipodes, before the mother of his children should have so far compromised herself as to declare herself on friendly terms with the not too virtuous "Amoretta."

And the scheme which these worthy matrons had concocted was to form a sort of "select club" among themselves—a kind of private "free-and-easy," to which only a few—a very few—choice spirits should be admitted. Leonora had no rooms of her own wherein to entertain more than half a-dozen visitors. Amoretta disapproved, on principle, of genuine "at homes." So a subscription was set on foot, to which, of course, Queenie contributed liberally, and rooms were engaged for a particular evening at a certain hotel, which may be called *The Greyhound*, and which was not so far from East Sheen as to be really inconvenient.

And when the dressmaker and Mrs. Frank Howard had arranged between them the most *recherché* and unapproachable costume their united wits could devise, the latter wrote to "Leonora," pledging herself to be at *The Greyhound* on the following Tuesday evening, and concluding with: "I have simply declined to go to Brighton, at present; but, of course, my husband knows nothing at all about our delightful little 'Free-and-Easy,' and must necessarily know nothing till after the affair is perfectly inaugurated. For my poor dear Frank is so terribly prejudiced and so far behind the times! The bare idea of a *ladies'* 'Free-and-Easy'—to which *gentlemen* are invited—would simply fill him with horror and disgust, and assure him that we are one and all qualifying, if not already fully qualified, for the inside of the nearest *lunatic asylum*!"

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## CHAPTER XXXIX.

## THE LADIES' "FREE-AND-EASY."

A FEW days passed away very quietly at Oakenshaw. Frank Howard was but little at home ; for his uncle was very ill, and quite unable to give the smallest attention to business ; little Frankie, too, was, on the whole, decidedly weaker, and, as Susan vehemently protested, "much worse in every respect."

One evening Mr. Howard came home unusually early, and found, rather to his surprise, that dinner had been ordered for an earlier hour than was customary. That such was the case was to him, however, rather a satisfaction than otherwise, for he had missed his luncheon through an impromptu visit to his uncle, and was, moreover, more than ordinarily anxious about his little son, who had, before his departure for business that morning, evinced symptoms that were decidedly calculated to make a tender parent not a little uneasy. Queenie had not at all expected to see her husband, when—still in morning-dress—she hurried down, a few minutes after the sounding of the dinner-gong, and took her seat at the table ; though the regular covers for two were laid, she had fully anticipated dining alone.

"I was quite thankful, I can tell you," said Frank, as he seated himself opposite his wife, "to find that dinner had been expedited, for I am pretty well sharp set already, and should not have cared to wait for another hour and a half, getting hungrier every moment. It is a melancholy fact that I have only taken a hard biscuit and a glass of sherry since breakfast."

"What made you miss your proper luncheon ?"

"I went to Kensington to spend an hour with my uncle."

"He is not worse than usual, I hope ?"

"On the contrary, he is better ; he has improved considerably during the last few days ; those magnetic appli-

ances seem to suit him. And hearing from his housekeeper how very much brisker he was this morning, I thought it would not be extremely imprudent if I ventured to lay before him a South American despatch that arrived by to-day's mail, and required a speedy and definite answer. He seemed quite in high feather, I assure you, at finding himself able to transact a little important business."

"Then he is really better, I suppose? Those doctors are such alarmists. I should not wonder in the least, if, after all, your uncle should live to flourish as an octogenarian."

"I hope he will, with all my heart, though I can scarcely venture to anticipate it; there is little doubt than organic disease is actually at work. But what makes you dine so much earlier? And why are you not *en grande tenue*, according to custom?"

"I am going out this evening, and I am quite too lazy to take the trouble of dressing twice."

"And where are you going, may I presume to inquire? I know we are both engaged to-morrow evening—or is it Thursday? I leave it to you entirely to keep account of all such matters. Business men have not the best memories for evening parties or *soirées*."

"I suppose not, and it is on Friday night that we are to dine at the Valancourts; and there is *le petit souper dramatique* afterwards, if we are not too tired."

"I shall be too tired, I daresay; but I suppose you will want to be present; I do wish the world would be content with one engagement for the evening. Still, you have not told me whither you are bound to-night, when you have made your usual *toilette*?"

"Since you are so much interested in knowing my every movement, I am going presently to Leonora's little entertainment."

"Queenie, I desired, nay, I implored, you to excuse yourself from this particular party. Either my uncle's state of health, or the child's, might have been quite sufficient plea for your remaining at home on this particular occasion; I told you pointedly that I disapproved of Mrs. Macnamara. I object strenuously to my wife's intimacy

with a person of her character. And, my dear, I must request you, even at the eleventh hour, to forego your engagement, and make your apologies to the lady in question."

"I am sorry to be obliged to turn a deaf ear to any 'request' of yours; but, indeed, I hold myself in honour bound to fulfil to-night's engagement. Any reasonable requirement of yours I am quite ready to meet; but I cannot, and will not, forfeit my word. I object to being stultified! You can spend the evening with the children; they will be delighted to have you in the nursery, and they will entertain you far more pleasantly than I should, if I were detained from my friends against my will and against my conscience."

"I think, if you persist in keeping this very undesirable appointment, I had better sacrifice myself, and accompany you to Mrs. Macnamara's. My presence will protect you alike from impertinence, and from injurious misconception."

"I am not in the least afraid of either; I shall encounter no danger of any kind. I can hold my own, under any circumstances. Besides, you are not invited! No one will be admitted who does not present a voucher. You will surely think twice before you place yourself in so doubtful, so very uncomfortable, a position?"

"Surely, where you are admitted, I may enter, too? In respectable society, the same card would serve for both, and, as married people, our friends and intimates ought to be identical."

"*Ought?* Perhaps so; but our tastes and opinions differ so completely that I do not see how it can ever be. And, once for all, Frank, I mean to have my own way in this particular! You have hindered my little trip to Trouville, you have put your veto on my dinner party, and now you presume to interfere with my private visiting-list. It is useless to go on with the discussion—I refuse to obey you! Unless you lock me up—and I think you will scarcely stretch your tyranny to such a point—I shall keep my appointment with Leonora. And as you have quite destroyed my appetite for anything more, I shall forego the remaining

courses, and retire to dress for the evening. You need not sit up for me, for I shall probably be late, and far too tired for unwelcome conversation. You understand that your accompanying me is quite out of the question; it would expose both of us to various unpleasant surmises."

"At least I claim to know *where* you are spending the evening. Mrs. Macnamara, I am well aware, does not receive in her own rooms."

"Of course she does not—how could she? A little uncertainty as to my exact whereabouts will not make you too uneasy, I hope. I will tell you to-morrow morning—or, better still, to-morrow evening—where I spend the next few hours. At present, I do not desire to continue a vexed subject. Pray do not let me disturb your full enjoyment of your dinner."

And, without further ado, Queenie rose from her seat at the head of the table, drank off the brimming bumper of champagne which, at her command, the butler had placed at her right hand, and swiftly left the room.

Frank was too much stupefied to hinder her departure, though he rose almost at the same instant as she did. But his appetite was as completely ruined as was his wife's, so, after a little trifling with a peach—which, though ripe and luscious, failed to gratify his taste—he, too, retired, and went to the library, whence, after a few minutes' troubled cogitation, he ascended to his son's apartment.

The little girls were joyously amusing themselves in the nursery; but, instead of lingering, as usual, to exchange a few pleasant words with them, with perhaps a little romp, he passed on straightway to the room where he constantly now found poor little suffering Frankie. To his consternation, Susan was giving way to tears; and at her master's appearance she exclaimed, "Oh, sir! thank God you are come! I have been praying that something might bring you home before the usual time, for I am sure the precious child is very much worse."

"What makes you think so, Susan?"

"His looks, sir, for one thing; and his moaning, and the tendency to those terrible convulsions. He was *quite* convulsed for a minute or two this afternoon."

"Did you tell your mistress?"

"Yes, sir; I took the liberty of going to her room; but she was very busy, and mightily took up with a grand new dress, that she calls a *costume*; and she seemed too much occupied to listen to what I had to say, except to ask over again what Dr. Morrison had said, when he paid his regular visit in the morning."

"And what was Dr. Morrison's opinion of my poor boy?"

"He thought him very ill, sir; but not worse than usual. He saw no call to be seriously alarmed, he assured me, though if there should be any symptom of the fits recurring, he desired a message to be sent round to his house."

"And has a message been sent?"

"I sent word of what had happened, and what I feared, directly I perceived the convulsive movements. Deborah went round herself, because I trusted in her like; and I knew that she would say the exact thing she ought to say, and not make light of the trouble; but the doctor, he was out, called to an urgent case, away at Barnes; but Deborah saw Mrs. Morrison, and she promised to send him here as soon as he returned home, and could swallow just a mouthful of food. He may come any minute, of course, or it may be quite late in the evening before he puts in an appearance. I can't help wishing, though, he might make no delay."

"I will go and see the child for myself, Susan. Is he awake?"

"That's more than I can say, sir. He does not speak, though sometimes he moans, and gives a weak little cry. I don't think he knows me; though at four o'clock this afternoon he asked what time it was, and whether Miss Felicia and Miss Dorothy were coming to have their tea in his sitting-room, as they often do when he is well enough to bear their prattle."

"And did they come?"

"No, sir; I felt sure he was not up to even their little voices; but when five o'clock struck, he roused up, and seemed not exactly asleep, but in a sort of stupor."



Mr. Howard walked at once to his son's bedside, and perceived that Susan's disquietude was by no means uncalled for. Little Frank lay very still, and his thin, worn face was whiter and more death-like than ever. His father's voice did not rouse him; his features were now and then momentarily distorted, and he seemed perfectly unconscious. His hands and feet were very cold, and his careful nurse had placed hot bottles under the blankets, in a vain attempt to impart artificial warmth.

"I wish Dr. Morrison would come. I have a great mind to call on that celebrated man at Richmond; he understands children's cases very well, so people say. Mrs. Miles thought him quite a specialist."

"If Dr. Morrison don't come in half an hour or so, and if there is no change for the better, I do think it will be wise to send for the Richmond gentleman; sir. Shall I tell Gent to saddle a swift horse?"

"No; do not leave the child for a moment, for no one understands him as well as you do. I will give Gent his orders myself. Black Bob shall be ready for mounting at a moment's notice, if Dr. Morrison be not on the spot very quickly."

Mr. Howard hurried straightway to the stables, and gave his groom all due instructions. If requisite, he himself would ride Black Bob to Richmond; it was not very far to go, and he would go more swiftly than the groom. But on returning to Frankie's room, he turned aside in the outer corridor, and knocked at his wife's door, and found her, with her French maid's assistance, putting the finishing touches to a very elaborate toilet.

"What is it now?" cried Queenie impatiently, as she dropped a diamond spray she was trying to fasten in her hair. "I have not a minute to spare, for the carriage ought to be at the door now. I shall be later than I intended, already."

"Queenie," said Frank gently, but gravely, "you must not go; indeed, our boy is very, *very* ill. I am not sure but that he is actually dying."

"Nonsense, you always make the very worst of his ailments, Mr. Howard. I cannot count the number of times

that hapless child has been reported *in extremis*. He will be all right again to-morrow morning."

"If you have any heart you will not leave the house to-night; he is worse than I have ever seen him before!"

"You always think him worse than he has ever been before. Two months ago you would not quit the nursery lest every breath should be his last; Susan and you are a pretty pair of alarmists, and you really encourage the child in his hypochondriacal fancies. It is only a case of very sensitive nerves; that great physician from Savile Row—I forget his name—assured us both that it was so! And when I call in a medical man, I accept his *dictum*! What is the use of paying so heavy a fee if you cannot rely on the man's opinion. There, make yourself useful, and clasp that bracelet for me; it refuses to snap properly, and I hear the carriage coming round the sweep. I shall never be ready if you persist in talking to me."

"I must talk to you! I cannot make you see the poor child's danger. Dismiss your maid for a few minutes. I have something to say that *must* be said, and without loss of time."

"I cannot dismiss Victorine, she is too busy. The 'something' must be deferred, at least till I return."

"Dismiss your maid immediately!" was Frank's inflexible rejoinder. "Victorine, go? I command you! Go!"

Victorine perfectly comprehended her master's tone; she knew that when he spoke to her in that imperative voice she, at least, must obey; to trifle with him then was more than her place was worth.

"*Pauvre madame! ah, le cruel monstre! le scélérat!*" muttered the Frenchwoman, as, shrugging her shoulders after the peculiar fashion of her species, she left the room, shutting the door behind her with a violence that, under any other circumstances, would have called forth from her exacting mistress a very severe reprimand.

But Mr. Howard understood very little French, especially when it was spoken rapidly and indistinctly; and Mrs. Howard, in her present mood, was by no means disinclined to endorse her attendant's sentiments. Of course, Victorine retired no further than the door, where she re-

mained listening intently, the great corridor being quite deserted.

"Queenie!" said her husband, when they were alone; "I desire you to remain at home this evening—nay, more, I *command* you; and I expect you to obey me."

If Frank Howard had not used that one marital word, which roused all Queenie's fiercest passions, and goaded her on to stubborn resistance, to defiance even, he might have succeeded in coercing, if not in persuading her. But she only set her face like a flint, and replied, with white lips and large angry eyes, "Command as you will! I refuse, absolutely refuse to obey you!"

"You will go, in spite of all that I have said?"

"Certainly I shall! I promised to obey a kind and rational husband, not a stern autocrat, who is as unreasonable as he is ridiculous and stupid!"

"Have you no regard for my opinion, my earnest wish? Do you not care for your husband's affection?"

"I am not at all sure that I do; lovers and husbands differ sadly, I am afraid. You did not 'command' me in other days, before we stood together at the marriage altar, and in the presence of our own people, in our own church, exchanged our vows! But it is vain to dispute now that the rubicon is fairly passed, and there is no time; I must be gone!"

"You refuse to listen, Regina Osborne?"

"To listen *now*? Of course I do; I have no time to spare in worse than vain quibble."

"God forgive you, for if this night the child die, I feel that I never can."

"You would not cherish so unchristian a spirit, surely? I *must* go now; you can visit on me the consequences of my rebellion as vindictively as you choose—to-morrow!"

"There will be no 'to-morrow' for us as husband and wife, if you persist in your unnatural determination."

"You can hardly obtain a divorce on grounds so absurdly ridiculous, I am sure!"

"There are separations more final than can be pronounced in any court of law. You will remain my wife, legally, of course; but if now you elect to go to Mrs.

Macnamara; and to set my will at defiance, you go out of my heart, and, as far as may be, out of my life for ever and ever! Henceforth we shall be two people, we shall go our separate ways—God help us both!”

With white, set face, and her beautiful eyes flashing forth her determination, she simply returned—“Very well; be it so; *I do* elect, then, to disregard your will—your caprice, and unjust suspicion, rather! and keep my promise to Leonora. I am going to the *Greyhound Hotel*, where we held the Women’s Rights Convention some little time ago. Now, *do* leave me!”

“I leave you, Regina, and I do not return. You will live to repent this hour—and I—I shall deplore it to my life’s end.”

Mrs. Howard made no reply; she only clasped the refractory bracelet, and drew on her delicate pale blue gloves, at the same time ringing the bell, as a signal that she was ready for the carriage. Without another word Mr. Howard left the room, and husband and wife parted.

With unwavering step Queenie descended, her long trailing, sheeny robes sweeping around her, as she passed through the hall, and, taking her seat, imperatively desired the coachman to drive on with all possible expedition. It was half-an-hour later than she had intended to leave home—she was distressed at her involuntary unpunctuality.

Now where the Greyhound Hotel really is we shall not concern ourselves to explain; it is quite sufficient to say that it is within an easy distance of East Sheen; and yet not quite so near as some may be led to suppose. Within half-an-hour, by dint of swift riding—and Queenie’s carriage horses were of the fleetest—the lady of Oakenshaw reached her destination. She found herself on entering the Assembly Room, where the “Ladies’ Free-and-Easy” was held, quite the latest arrival; she was enthusiastically welcomed by “Leonora,” and almost embraced by the gushing “Amoretta,” who, most fantastically and expensively dressed, advanced with open arms and something that sounded very much like *cheers* to receive her. Close behind them pressed Count Alexis Von Langen of Goldingen, with rapt, admiring gaze, and reverential mien;

and on his arm Queenie was conducted as if she had been a crowned personage to the velvet chair which had been reserved especially for her. And now, after a few preliminary observations, the "Ladies' Select Club," the delightful, unconventional "Free-and-Easy," was declared duly and fully opened.

There was very little business to be transacted. Mrs. Macnamara, who figured as "Leonora," had already been elected Lady President, and it remained only to acknowledge her in proper form. Amoretta, of course, was vice-president; and, after her name, followed those of about six or seven ladies—Mrs. Howard, as *la bella Regina*, taking the lead. Four gentlemen only had been elected members, or, rather, *habitués* of the club, and to them was assigned manifold duties and certain privileges—foremost among which was that of paying, almost without limitation, for the entertainment of the beautiful ladies. Beauty and wit and extreme amiability had been declared at the outset to be the only terms of admission on which the "Free-and-Easy" could be opened to its members.

As the evening proceeded it became evident that free-and-easy was in very truth the order of the newly-founded society. Business—so termed—was quickly disposed of, and it was conducted in so easy and *piquant* a fashion, that Queenie was almost sorry when the "fun" came to a conclusion. But more fun followed, when conversation became the order of the night, and it was quite understood that everybody was permitted to say precisely what he or she chose; and a *golden rose* was hung significantly over the *portière* of the principal entrance of the closed apartment, proclaiming to all who had the *entrée* that parlance of every sort was strictly *sub rosa*.

Queenie was rather taken by surprise at some of the extraordinary utterances of her fellow-members, who had evidently thrown off all restraint, and were resolved that the "Ladies' Club" should not have its reputation for nothing. Especially she was startled at the licence taken by Mrs. Tregenna Tregonel, and now and then her cheek glowed at the enunciation of some equivocal innuendo, the repetition of some scandalous anecdote, or a half-veiled

allusion to an impropriety. Never had Mrs. Howard seen her companions and bosom friends under greater disadvantage.

"Amoretta" was simply *vulgar*; there was no question about it. She was clever, undoubtedly, but singularly unscrupulous, and she allowed her tongue a licence that filled the neophyte with dismay. Some of her witty remarks, and by no means delicate allusions, brought the blush of shame to Queenie's lovely face, and her cheeks burned as she listened to what some one called "highly seasoned" conversation! She thought, with a shudder, that she might have been in a convocation of polished courtesans rather than in an assembly of virtuous gentlewomen!

Nearly all the ladies smoked cigarettes, and even in an instance or two, cigars. Leonora and Queenie were the only exceptions to the "free-any-easy" rule. Amoretta was obscured in a cloud of smoke, while around her were several gentlemen, each one puffing away at a well-coloured meerschaum; and the whole party, evidently enjoying the position to the utmost, were laughing and talking as loudly as if they were the sole occupants of the compartment. Amoretta was exceptionally noisy and jubilant. There was some music, but nothing at all worth listening to—comic songs, light flashy operatic pieces, dance music, and amatory songs, such as might have suited a party of Cyprians, filled up the *programme*, after the performance of a noisy and well-known *overture*, supposed to be the *pièce de résistance* of the impromptu concert. Queenie had hoped to lose the vexed remembrance of that *mauvais quart d'heure* which had elapsed before she left home, but her husband's words still rang in her ears, and she could not forget his last glance of extreme displeasure.

Still, as she told herself again and again, she was most unfairly dealt with; she was not allowed the liberty which was her rightful portion as a young and beautiful married woman, who was all the fashion in a certain circle. She was resplendently lovely; she was rich; she had always, from her early childhood, done the very thing it pleased her to do, and left undone that which did not please her; and

now she was harshly reproved, sternly checked, and rudely forbidden to go her own chosen way. She had looked for a most satisfactory evening ; she had fully expected to be the brilliant queen of a *salon*, such as she had often pictured to herself, and had often desired to establish on her own account. She felt tired, dull, dispirited, and miserably disappointed, and her head was beginning to ache. Had she left her sick child, had she quarrelled with her indulgent husband, for nothing better than the noisy, vapid society of an underbred set of semi-polite, genteel rabble? "*Le jeu ne vaut pas la chandelle*," was her secret and deeply-regretful reflection.

She was thinking if she should not feign indisposition, and release herself, on any pretence, from the uncongenial people about her, when Leonora and Alexis approached, and drawing each a *fauteuil* to her side, commenced to engage her in conversation.

"You are weary, my sweet friend?" said Leonora, taking Queenie's feverish, listless hand. "I am afraid our spirits are too much for you—we are too noisy for you!"

"I am much afraid the smoke distresses *Madame*!" softly whispered Count Alexis ; "we certainly bargained for nothing stronger than mild cigarettes ; and did not expect champagne in tumblers, or the fumes of Cognac."

For most of the ladies and gentlemen present were quaffing the sparkling beverage ; only Amorètta, and one or two more, were not content with wine, but had preferred to adopt a liberal allowance of best French brandy, dashed with soda-water.

"I certainly did not expect to find so much smoking," coldly replied Mrs. Howard ; "and the smell of strong brandy is decidedly unpleasant. And I have listened in vain for the flash of wit and the brilliant repartee I was led to anticipate."

"Ah !" said Alexis, "there has been a mistake—a great mistake somewhere. I am astonished to see intellectual ladies finding so much enjoyment in this kind of thing—smoking like the *bourgeoisie*, who, doubtless, frequent the bars and tap-rooms of public-houses. Madame Leonora,

and you, *bella Regina*, and my more insignificant self, are decidedly out of our element."

"Do not you smoke, Count Alexis?" languidly asked Queenie.

"No!—or very seldom. And I *never* smoke in the presence of ladies. I am sure you are indisposed."

"My head aches, and I am tired with the noise of so many people talking altogether. I did not come here, either, in the best of spirits—my husband disapproved of my fulfilling my engagement with you and your friends, Leonora."

"That was certainly unreasonable, *mia bella*! A married woman is, undoubtedly, free to choose her own intimates—to form her own circles! And I am afraid, *cara mia*, that Mr. Howard, who is certainly one of the best and most generous men in the world, is certainly a little—just a little, tinctured with the spirit of the green-eyed monster! Your inestimable husband, my dear, should have been mated with one far less lovely, less spirited—one infinitely less brilliant—less fitted to shine in high society. A blue-eyed, flax-haired *Hausfrau* would have suited him to perfection. Now, do not contradict me! We speak the truth here, you know, and abjure trashy conventionalities; and although these ladies and gentlemen have certainly exceeded all bounds—it behoves us to be true to ourselves. How are your pretty little girls, dearest Queenie?"

"They are quite well, as, I am glad to say, they almost always are. But my poor little boy is very sadly this evening, and I am much concerned about him. Indeed, Mr. Howard would have detained me at home, chiefly on the child's account. I came here expressly against his will—against his express commands!"

"How *dare* he command you? he is not fit to be your husband, my poor dear child! It was very good and brave of you to come, Queenie! We owe you ten thousand thanks—I only wish you had been better repaid."

"And so do I. But I felt it due to myself to keep faith with you—to redeem my pledge, as it were, and I wished to enter my protest against the undue assumption of marital authority. I felt that I could not be untrue to my sex, and



tamely submit ; you perceive, I have learned well some of your lessons, dear Leonora. Only, I do wish poor little Frankie had not chosen this particular night on which to be so alarmingly ill ! ”

“ You think he really is ill, then ? It is not one of his chronic ailing turns—an aggravation of his peevish fits ? ”

“ I am afraid, candidly, he is worse than usual ; and if Mr. Howard had not rudely forbidden me to leave home, I might—I don’t know—but I think, perhaps, I *might* have been induced to spend the evening in the nursery.”

“ That might have proved too great a trial for your nerves,” whispered Count Alexis, with a compassionate expression of countenance. “ I know how extremely sensitive you are ; you would have suffered as much as the unfortunate child, whom doubtless you could not have relieved.”

“ I know I could have done poor Frankie no good, if I had spent whole hours with him ! I understand nothing whatever about illness—I am of little or no use in a sick chamber ; his faithful nurse—who was also his father’s nurse—never leaves him ; and she knows exactly what is best to be done, and how to do it. The doctor, too—who has attended him for years—paid his usual visit this morning, and found no special cause for apprehension. But Mr. Howard was very much displeased because I declined to enact the *rôle* of ‘ devoted mother.’ I am afraid I shall meet with no very pleasant reception on my return—even if the poor child is better ! ”

“ Do not hasten your return—do not go back to Oakenshaw to-night. Why should you ? I am certain that your faithful Leonora will be only too happy to find you shelter—to share her home with you till your unworthy husband shall come to his senses and implore you to pardon his presumption. Under Leonora’s wing you may make your own terms.”

“ My husband is not unworthy ; he is only like the majority of English husbands : he has no compassion on the ‘ weaker vessel ’—he will be lord and master ; for wives, after all, you know, are property in this highly-civilised country, and we luckless women must not incense our

lawful owners. Mr. Howard, true to his sex, will—to quote 'Amoretta' there, who, I think, looks as if she were on the verge of inebriation—well, *rule the roast!*"

"Ah! if I had been the thrice-happy man—the transcendently-blessed individual—to whose lot it had fallen to be the guardian of your happiness, I trust I should never have so offended you—never given you cause to complain of my want of consideration. I should have been far too enraptured—calling you my very own *bella Regina*—to have given you one moment's cause for distress."

Queenie's anger would have flashed forth, scathing to the quick the presumptuous mortal who should have dared so to address her only a few months before; but just now she received with all possible equanimity these most impertinent and uncalled-for assurances.

"You imagine so," she said quite gently. "I believe that all men—especially unmarried men—think the remainder of their sex fully capable of infidelity; they alone are eternally constant—they alone are to be trusted. Lovers—I should say, admirers—and husbands are of widely different species."

"Ah! if I might only be tried! If you could but read my heart—my inmost heart!"

"Count Alexis," and Queenie assumed an air of reproachful displeasure, "I cannot possibly allow you to address me with so much freedom of speech. You forget that I am a wedded wife!"

"Indeed I do not! Would that I could forget, at once and for ever, the deplorable fact, *mia bella! mia Regina!*"

"I understand Italian; be so good as to speak English, or, if you prefer it—*French*."

"It may be more prudent, for some of these women have preternaturally sharp ears." Leonora had gone away on some business or other. "And the French they do speak is no better than horrible jargon—mere boarding-school French, you know! But I can talk in any language it pleases you to command; I am equally at home in German—my mother tongue—in French, in Italian, in Spanish, or in English!"

"How came you to know so many languages?"

"I am sure I cannot say. They came to me, I suppose. Men of my rank in life—men of family, whatever be their nation, can always converse fluently with foreigners of undoubted civilisation. Though French and English only, provided they be perfectly pure, will take one all over the world, I should say. We will speak French, then?—such French as few present are likely to understand. There is not a woman here who could hold her own for five minutes with a Parisian, excepting always Leonora, who can speak any language or patter, on earth, as to the manner born; and she is not here just now."

"And Amoretta! She can converse fluently in all sorts of patois, even; she is a most accomplished linguist."

"I should hardly call her that, I think; patois is patois, and does not necessarily include language. Besides, Madame—or Mademoiselle—Amoretta is, at the present moment, quite past the comprehension of a *sotto voce* conversation; she has taken too much of *Hennessy* or *Martelli's* Cognac, dashed though it be with soda-water."

"How excessively disgusting!"

"It is lamentable, in my opinion. Ah! there is a call for cards. I wonder they have not been produced before. May I not bring you a biscuit and half a glass of champagne? You look as if you were almost exhausted. Do not be afraid I shall insult you with a tumbler; I could not worship a woman who gave herself, even moderately, to wine, or alcoholic beverages. I am afraid I should not tolerate her."

"Your wife must not be a lover of stimulants, then?"

"My *wife* never would, for I should never place my affection—no, not for a quarter of an hour—on so weak a personage. I can love only a woman who unites in herself all imaginable perfections—the fairest and sweetest of her sex. In short, *Regina mia*! one who is incomparable as yourself."

"I am not incomparable, I assure you. My husband does not even think me extremely superior."

"He does not deserve such angelic loveliness. Who can gaze upon beauty so unsurpassed and not confess its power? Who can fail to acknowledge himself subdued—to *adore*?"

"You really must not allow yourself so much licence. I cannot, *indeed* I cannot, permit it."

"Ah, forgive! Have pity! An unhappy wretch cannot always keep silence. The heart must disclose itself sometimes, or *burst*. Do let me bring you a little wine; you seem overdone."

"I am perplexed—grieved, at your rashness. I should be glad—thankful, even, for a cup of tea. That is all the stimulant I desire."

"Let me escort you to the tea-room. The attendant to whom the charge was entrusted had orders not to leave her post during the evening."

And somewhat to the disappointment of Count Alexis, the young woman who presided over the tea-pot was really at her post, and after a few minutes' delay a cup of good tea was quite procurable. But while she busied herself with the spirit-kettle, which at this late hour had been allowed to get entirely "off the boil," Queenie's admirer had a good opportunity of "pouring forth his soul" and paying some of the most exquisite and delicate compliments she had ever received. He was only faintly reprimanded. *La bella Regina* could not be quite insensible, could not be so demonstratively "unkind" to so refined, so perfectly accomplished an adorer.

When she and her *cavalière servante* went back to the large room Leonora was still absent, but all the other members of the "free-and-easy" were still occupied with cards, and it was quite evident that high play had become the feature of the entertainment.

"They are playing for money; for high stakes!" whispered Queenie, who could not understand the nature of the game that was in course of being played; only it was quite evident, even to a neophyte, that the game was entirely one of hazard, and not by any means one of skill.

"Is it *roulette*, or *rouge et noir*, or *what*?" asked Mrs. Howard of her companion, as she stood watching a green table which had made an impromptu entrance during the friends' absence in the tea-room; "or is it what is called *cabaret*?"

"Do not ask me; I know so little about dice and cards,"

returned Count Alexis, with a gesture that expressed supreme contempt. "Let us go away—*bellissima Regina mia!*"

The pair turned away, and conversed at some distance from the players, till, at about twelve o'clock, Leonora reappeared, and supper was announced for all such as were ready for banquet.

Very few were ready for it. Only Mrs. Macnamara, led by a certain Colonel Sharp, and Mrs. Howard, leaning on the arm of the Count Von Langen, took their places at the festive board, where a delicate repast of the most *recherché* order was set forth, with all possible display of rare exotics and choice wines; and a wondrous glitter of silver, soft lamplight, and crystal. The quartette divided themselves into duets as regarded conversations, and the two couples were seated at opposite ends of the long table. The gambling party did not disturb them till it was past two o'clock; and when, at last, they came in, noisy and full of excitement, Queenie began to think of inquiring for her carriage.

It was there, of course; it had been awaiting her pleasure for several hours, and the trio with whom she had taken supper, saw her cloaked and safely seated; not without fervent protestations against her premature departure.

"I shall leave the place at once," whispered Alexis, as he pressed the fair hand that was not withdrawn. "*Au revoir*, sweetest and dearest of friends!"

"What shall I do with all these pigs of people?" cried Leonora, wistfully—"you were the only one worth keeping up the ball for, *mignonne!*"

"Oh!" protested Colonel Sharp—who had quaffed a little too deeply of the sparkling wine, and, though not exactly inebriated, was what some of his companions called "half-seas-over;"—"oh! it is quite too early to show the white feather; the best part of the fun—the true jollity is yet to come."

Queenie heard the door of the carriage shut, and the order issued to "drive on," with something very much resembling intense relief. As she was borne swiftly along the quiet deserted roads, she recalled, with a feeling

approaching nausea, the scenes she had but just witnessed, the coarse revels in which she had borne her part.

The blandishments of Alexis had not given her more than a passing satisfaction ; she blushed to the roots of her hair, and she felt her face burn in the midnight darkness, as she recollected some of the bold expressions that had fallen from his lips ; some of the hopes and fears he had presumed to whisper in her ear. Would he have dared to speak as he had spoken if she had comported herself as became a strictly virtuous, honourable matron ? What would her mother say, could she have listened to the unhallowed professions that had made her foolish heart throb a quarter of an hour ago, not with one pulse of real affection, but only with gratified vanity ? With what severe dignity would her saintly parent have turned from the "rabble rout" among whom she had moved for the last few hours.

In spite of every effort to reassure herself, Regina Howard felt sick at heart, tired of her evening, tired of herself ; weary even of the flattery of which she had drunk such copious draughts, and humbled in her inmost soul. The horses moved quickly on under the starry skies ; she recognised the familiar trees and houses as she passed them, like one in a miserable dream from which she feared, yet longed, to awake. She was feverishly anxious to reach her home ; it seemed to her now as though she had been an age absent from it. How slowly the stupid coachman drove ; how monotonously sounded the tramp, tramp, of the weary horses ; would Oakenshaw never be reached ? And yet she dreaded finding herself once more in her own quiet room.

At last her destination was reached, the carriage was stopped, and her own footman was helping her to alight. She longed to say, "How is the sick child ?—how is Master Howard ?" but she dared not—she scarcely knew why—ask the innocent question. "If anything *had happened*, he would surely tell ; he would have some message to deliver," she told herself, as she strove to silence the apprehensions that would thrust themselves upon her. She passed through the dimly-lighted hall ; but no attendant was there to meet

the mistress ; she felt somewhat like a returned fugitive. As she slowly ascended the stairs, she suddenly recalled the warning words which her Aunt Fairfax had spoken years before : "Vanity is the sin of sins, and wrecks more souls than open vice !"

Was it truly so ? She felt at that moment as if she *might*, on that "rock of vanity," make shipwreck of her earthly life. Much had been given, would not much be required of her ? Would she, in very deed, be beaten with *many stripes* ? She reached her own luxurious apartment ; the fire was burning brightly on the hearth, the waxen tapers were all alight on the mantel-piece and on the splendid toilet-table ; warmth and radiance, and luxury surrounded her on every side. What was it that brought to her memory a text—or texts, rather—that she had learned in her childish days, in obedience to her nurse, who, as well as her mother, had impressed upon her Scripture truth from her infancy.

Was it the sight of her long-neglected Bible, as it lay in its accustomed place on a side-table, that made her recall the words : "*Ye have set at naught all My counsel, and would none of My reproof. I also will mock when your fear cometh ; when your fear cometh as desolation, and your destruction cometh as a whirlwind ; when distress and anguish cometh upon you.*" And, again : "*Therefore shall they eat of the fruit of their own way, and be filled with their own devices. . . . The prosperity of fools shall destroy them !*"

Where was Victorine ? why was she not awaiting her mistress's return ? Queenie had often come home at a later hour, and her maid had always been in dutiful attendance. She rang the bell impatiently. "What could the thoughtless girl be thinking of ? Had she not been apprised of her liege-lady's arrival ? Where could she be ?"

In a very short time Victorine appeared, and her eyes were swollen with crying. "What is it ?" demanded her mistress ; "has Mr. Howard been scolding you ?" For it crossed her mind that something unusual might have transpired, the master having spoken angrily to the servant at their last interview.

"*Mais non ! Non, madame. C'est que Je suis bien triste.*"

"And what makes you so very *triste*? Why, you are crying still, silly child. Is anything the matter?"

"Oh, madame! for the love of Heaven do not ask me; permit that I finish to undress you, and then let me send Mrs. Forester to you; she is still in the housekeeper's room."

Now, Mrs. Forester was the Oakenshaw head-cook, and, to tell the truth, the housekeeper of the large establishment, although she did not exactly take rank as such.

"What can Forester possibly be doing at this time of night?" demanded Queenie with some petulance, and not a little dismay. "You know, all of you, I never require the household kept up on my account. It is quite sufficient that you are in waiting. What is keeping Forester out of bed?"

"Ah, madame! *chère madame!* *C'était la petite ange!*"

"What do you mean? Speak out, Victorine, and leave off crying, I desire you; you make me nervous—you frighten me. I am not well, and am dreadfully tired."

"Ah, *la pauvre Madame!*"

"Victorine, tell me, without any more ado, is Master Frankie—worse?"

"He was worse, very much worse, after Madame left home. But—now——"

"Speak out, girl! Is the child relieved, or—is he *dead*?"

"Madame! *M. votre fils*, he is with the good God!"

"Do you mean to tell me that he is gone?—that he is *dead*!"

"Madame, I grieve to say it; but—*il est mort.*"

Mrs. Howard spoke no word, but she turned so deathly white that the maid rushed to the bell to summon assistance. It had been arranged that the housekeeper should come to Victorine's aid, if succour were needed. But without a word Queenie rose and, not yet disarrayed of her finery, rushed away to little Frank's room.

Yes, her child was there, on the couch which his weary limbs had pressed for many a sad day; but all was still, the waxen features were composed in death, the tiny hands were clasped on the unheaving breast, the white-robed form was



ready for its premature grave ; God had called the little one to his eternal rest. Loving hands, but not his miserable mother's, had strewn pale blossoms on the placid corpse, that was all that remained to Regina Howard of her only son.

Suddenly, all the mother awoke in Queenie's long estranged heart, and she remembered only the joy—the delicious joy—that had stolen over her spirit, when exhausted with the long pain, she lay blissfully with her first-born on her bosom, forgetting the anguish for joy that a man was born into the world ! And now the boy, so welcomed on the threshold of earthly life, had passed away from earth ; she might go to him, but he would never, no never, return to her. What would she not give *now* to recall the neglect of years, especially the unnatural coldness of the last few months. Oh ! if she had only listened to the still small voice that had for one passing moment whispered to her that the child *might* be actually dying ; if she had but heeded her husband's warning, if she had obeyed his behests. She flung herself down by the little flower-strewn body, and made her bitter moans, as her warm hand touched the icy fingers, and her soft lips came in contact with the cheek and brow that seemed—what, indeed, they were—no more than lifeless marble. That passionate mother's kiss came too late—*all too late !*

How long she wept and sobbed by those undisturbed remains she did not know ; loathing of herself, and vain, wild regret filled all her soul. Minutes, perhaps hours, were gliding by, and she was all unconscious of the flight of time. She was roused at last by a sound that awakened her to bitter reality. She was not alone in that chamber of death, and it was her husband's voice—cold, stern, and altogether changed—that fell upon her ear. Mr. Howard had been near her all the while, but she had not caught sight of the figure of the bereaved father, sitting in the darkest corner of the deeply-shadowed room, his head resting on the table, in his abandonment of grief.

"Oh, Frank, Frank ! oh, my husband !" sobbed Queenie, as she threw herself into his arms, those loving arms that had been her safe refuge in every sorrow—few and small as

they had been—ever since the day she had called herself his wedded wife.

But, to her extreme consternation, she was quietly and firmly repulsed, her head was gently lifted from that faithful and hitherto sympathising breast, and she was placed in the chair he had himself vacated.

“Oh, Frank, speak to me—comfort me!” wailed Regina, as she strove to rise and resume her position, but fell back almost fainting as he made no effort to assist her, and looked on her weakness and pain with a stony countenance, from which all loving expression had passed away; and she remembered that almost the last words she had heard from his lips were words of gravest warning—“If you so set my will at defiance, you go out of my heart, and, as far as may be, out of my life, for ever, and for ever.”

And was it *truth*? had she indeed gone out of his heart, and out of his life—for ever and for ever? She lifted up her voice, in one long and bitter cry, and stretched out her arms appealingly, but response there was none. His arms were folded, calmly yet immovably on his bosom; and the solemnly-set face told her that she was excluded now, and henceforth from that blessed haven of consolation. Again she extended her hands, alternately clasping and wringing them in her deep despair—and agony. “Oh, Frank, Frank, speak to me!”

“I have nothing to say to you,” he replied, in a voice so hollow and unlike his own, that his wife started; “I warned you that if you left your home, and that dying child this night—last night, rather—the love that has been yours so long would be yours no more—*nevermore*! The bond, the sacred bond, that has been between us two is broken; we are no longer husband and wife—save legally.”

“You do not—cannot mean it, Frank? In the presence of our dead child, you cannot put me, his mother, from your life, and from your heart!”

“You are his mother, for you bore him; but you broke the fleshly tie yourself; the hallowed name of mother is not for you; it is not enough to bring a child into the world! A mother must live in her child and for her child. Her heart must beat unfailingly unchangeably, for him, or——”

"Or what?"

"She is not worthy of the holy name of mother. A selfish, self-centred mother is an anomaly: you have been such. The good Lord of all forgive you!"

"But you cannot?"

"I forgive, inasmuch as I shall never resent the injury you have done me and my dead son; but I cannot take you back into my heart, which henceforth is barred and closed against you."

"And yet it is said, love is love for evermore."

"True love, while it lives, is for evermore. But it can be killed—slain! That which is wilfully murdered cannot be restored to life. You may spill the costly wine upon the ground, but no regret can refill the golden cup; you may fling a priceless jewel into the fathomless abyss, it has gone from you for all time. No repentance can recall a slighted treasure which is wilfully cast away: it is lost—irretrievably lost!"

"Oh, do not be so angry! You have never been really angry with me before."


"I am not angry. I am bitterly pained—disappointed—disillusioned! The woman I once loved as not one woman in a thousand is loved, is simply non-existent. But I pray you, leave me now; my heart is not so dead yet that it cannot be tortured anew. Let me keep watch by my dear, dead child! You need not weep so wildly: all that you have ever prized will still be yours,—you will only miss that which you have scorned; youth, beauty, and wealth—all mortal grace—you yet possess! other things, which you can do very well without, you will scarcely miss; after a little while you will miss them not at all!"

As he spoke, Frank Howard opened wide the nursery door, and quietly, but authoritatively, motioned to his wife to pass; she was too humbled now to question his will—she had not the spirit to dispute his sway, and she went forth docile as a little child. Her husband followed her to the entrance of her own corridor, then he bowed, and turned back to his lonely watch beside the newly dead. Queenie crept back to her own apartment, and sat down by the extinguished fire, the ashes of which choked the now

cheerless grate ; the candles had burned low in the sockets, and several had flickered and smouldered till they had expired. And there she sat, desolate and alone, till the grey dawn began to glimmer through the one window that was left undraped. Then, shivering with cold, she crept into bed, and lay there for hours with wide-open, staring eyes that could not weep ; the watchful household guarding her imaginary slumber from all disturbance.

Late in the afternoon she roused herself to dress, and that without assistance, for she shrank from seeing Victorine, and from hearing her voluble French patter. She had one plain black robe in her wardrobe—one that she had worn on some ceremonial occasion ; and instinctively she put that on, feeling as if sackcloth and ashes were the only fitting raiment for her now. She went down to the dining-room, but finding that dinner was laid for one only, went back to her own apartment, and when soup and delicate meats were brought to her, turned from them with a sick loathing she had never experienced before.

A solitary evening and another solitary night ensued ; and next day her little daughters, with tearful faces and quivering lips, were brought to her ; but their sweet voices and tender caresses failed to yield her the consolation for which she yearned. On the evening before the funeral, she stole into the distant chamber where the dead child lay, and looked her last on the changed countenance, for the coffin was still unclosed ; and she left a white rose on the thin worn hand, that would never clasp an earthly flower again. But her husband—the father of her children, whom she had spoken of as “not her choice”—she had never seen since he had parted from her in the corridor, in the early morning of that most memorable day.



## CHAPTER XL.

## THE SCALES FALL FINALLY FROM QUEENIE'S VISION.

LITTLE Frankie was laid to rest in a quiet churchyard close at hand, on the sheltered confines of the neighbouring park. The darkened windows of Oakenshaw were once more flung open to the day; hushed footsteps no longer trod the broad corridors, and the household, generally, returned to its accustomed ways. And still Queenie abode silently and sadly in her undisturbed solitude; her husband did not even consult her on any domestic or conventional question; he gave all necessary orders for the funeral, only informing his wife, in the briefest of notes, that at a certain hour the last ceremonies would be completed.

But before the day came, Dolly arrived, overflowing with sympathy for both father and mother thus bereaved of their eldest born, and bringing tender messages of condolence from the grandparents at Clapham Common. Mrs. Philip Osborn, however, was fairly aghast, when at length she fully understood the state of things between Queenie and her husband, and her eyes filled with tears at the first sight of her friend's woe-begone, altered, yet still lovely countenance.

"Oh, Dolly! cannot you give me some comfort—cannot you make it all right again, as it was before?" wailed Queenie, almost pitifully, as she wrung her hands in despair at the sight of her adopted sister.

"My poor dear!" responded Dolly, "I can only comfort you by saying that God will give back your lost child in another and better world. You must go to him, my Queenie, for he cannot return to you! And the darling will never suffer any more; he will not know pain and weariness again; for Jesus, who loves the little children, has taken him to His loving arms. Your little Frankie is happy now, dear!"

"Yes, he is happy, I know ; that is my sole consolation—if consolation it be. But, oh ! Dolly, I might have made him so much happier in this world ; I have been a most unnatural mother, and I left him to die, uncared for and untended, so far as I was concerned. Do you know that I was away on that dreadful night—away with Leonora and her hateful crew ? That I went to that wretched 'Ladies' Club,' in obstinate defiance of my husband ?"

"Yes ; I know something of the sad story, for I have seen Frank. But, Queenie, dear, I am sure that you bitterly repent ?"

"I repent in sackcloth and ashes ! I would give worlds, if I had them, to recall that hour, when I refused to listen—when I would not be warned. He implored me not to go with those people ; he besought me to stay with him, and with my dying child, and I would not listen. I knew the consequences if I persisted in disobedience ; but, Dolly, you know I never could bring myself to obey ; and I could not really believe that I should be harshly treated—and by my husband, too, who always professed to love me so tenderly and so devotedly."

"And who does love you tenderly and devotedly, Queenie, darling. There is no doubt, there never has been any doubt, of Frank's perfect sincerity ; but just now he is angry—and I cannot, dare not, say unjustly so. You must have patience, dear—you must humble yourself ; his displeasure will pass away, after a while ; he will take you to his heart again."

"He said that he never would. He all but swore that I should go out of his heart, and, as far as possible, out of his life, if I persisted in disregarding his will—if I left his house that night. He assured me solemnly that he meant what he said ; that thenceforth we should be, not husband and wife, but two people, going each our separate ways. No, Dolly, he will not forgive ! I think God may forgive me—some day—for I know *He* forgives the worst sins, if one is really penitent ; but my husband never will ! I am nothing to him now !"

"I cannot believe *that*, Queenie. He is displeased, and lawfully displeased, without a doubt ; but he is, through it

all, your own husband—your loving, tender husband ; and though he may visit your fault—perhaps severely—for a little while, he will not be cruel—he will not be too hard ! But again I say, you must humble yourself ; you have done Frank a wrong.” And remembering how she had permitted Von Langen to address her through that memorable evening, she knew that she had, to a certain extent, “wronged” her faithful husband. She knew in her heart that a true, pure wife would never have listened to language such as the accomplished Alexis had *dared* to address to her. Queenie had been bred in a good school, but she had learnt her lessons ill ; nevertheless, the inner voice that will not be silenced told her that she had fallen, inasmuch as she had not hurled back with scorn and strongly expressed wrath the honied flatteries, the almost lover’s vows, that had been whispered in her ears, and poured out at her feet, to her—a mother and a married woman ! So she did not indignantly protest, as she would surely have protested only three months before, that she had not done her husband a *wrong* ! It was something of a comfort to her to know that Dolly must be necessarily ignorant of her folly ; she only, and no one else, not even Leonora, had overheard the Count’s protestations. Frank could not guess how she had lowered herself—“disgraced” herself, he would have said—by lending a not unwilling ear to the blandishments of a stranger. She thanked heaven he would never know. For Frank, the tenderest and most forbearing of husbands, as she could not but confess to herself that he had been ever since their wedding-day, was, nevertheless, inexorably stern on the question of womanly fidelity. A breath, a thought, was enough in his estimation to tarnish the fair fame of the loveliest, vainest coquette in all the world.

She only replied to Dolly’s grave objurgation, “I know I have been in the wrong ! I have provoked Frank dreadfully, though I do hope I have not estranged him irrevocably. And yet—oh ! Dolly, my heart smites within me when I recall his words—his very words : ‘ You will live to repent this hour, and I—I shall deplore it to my life’s end.’ And he said his love was slain—I had killed it by my perversity ! I had cast away the priceless jewel of his deep

affection—as I might cast a gem into the unfathomable ocean—it would be mine *never again* ! Will he, can he, keep his word ? ”

“ He *may*, though I trust not. I think perhaps it may be a long time before you win him to your side again. A man of his temperament is very slow to resentment ; but, once roused, I can quite understand that he is not at all too easily appeased. Have patience, dear Queenie ; bear his anger, his coldness, with gentleness ; prove your love, as only a wife can, and all will yet be right, I feel assured.”

“ I trust it will, Dolly, for you know I never could bear unkindness. I have owned to him that I was wrong, and what more can I say or do ? I thought I had left off loving him, but I have not ; I never loved him half so dearly as now that he is estranged. And I never knew how much my child was to me till he was taken from me. How true it is that our blessings brighten as they take their flight ! Perhaps, Dolly, if you were to speak for me, just a little word, he would listen to you. Frank thinks a great deal of your opinion, Dolly ; he is sure to endorse your judgment.”

“ I am not at all sure of that, dear. I do not think anything that I could say would go far to make him rescind his resolution. Neither do I believe Philip would approve of my interfering, however casually, between married people.”

“ If Philip were angry with you, Dolly, I would never rest till I had made you friends again ; there is something so unnatural, so very painful, in being at feud with your own husband.”

“ Yes, there is ; and though I cannot actually promise any aid, I will speak as you wish, if I have an opportunity.”

“ He is in the library now, I am almost sure. Go to him at once, and say what your own kind heart prompts you to say. What you say is always just and to the point ; I know you will be successful. Go, dear ! ”

And Dolly, who had never in her life refused Queenie any reasonable service, went, though quite against her better judgment. Her instinct told her that it was far better not



to intermeddle at present with the point at issue. She felt that married people should settle their quarrels—if they were so unhappy as to have any—between themselves; that no third person had any right or any business to take part, however remotely, with either side. They would be much more likely, she told herself, to come to an understanding, if left entirely to themselves, and she would herself be deeply pained—nay, even offended—if friend or relative should interpose between Philip and herself, supposing they needed to be reconciled. Which God forbid.

Frank was in the library, and he spoke kindly, even affectionately, to Dolly when she appeared in his presence again, with the intention, as he supposed, of simply saying “Good-bye” ere she left Oakenshaw. There was an undefinable expression on his face that convinced her that not yet was the hour for bespeaking Queenie’s pardon; not yet was the season for reunion. But she had, in some sort, accepted the trust, and she would, so far as in her lay, discharge it. She did not, however, lead the way to any conversation on the subject; she went straight to the point and quietly said: “Frank, poor Queenie is very much distressed. Will you not go to her and comfort her? Who can comfort her as you can?”

“I have no comfort to offer, Dolly. She and I must henceforth lead separate lives. She herself has made the division, it is none of my work; and I think—nay, I am sure—that the less said on so painful and delicate a subject, the better for all parties.”

“I feel it so, indeed; I have no right, not the remotest, to come between you two as mediator. Still, I cannot see my sister, my old companion, suffer and not hold out, on her behalf, the olive-branch of peace. Speak with her, as of old, Frank, and I am sure your anger can burn no more; you will perceive for yourself how crushed and humbled she is. She—the wilful, wayward, spoilt child of fortune, is contrite enough now, as you will find; only deal gently with her, for she cannot bear too much of displeasure. Remember! she has always had her own way—she has never been accustomed to restraint; she cannot bear any show of just resentment!”

"Dolly, I am not angry with her. I am pained ; I suffer to the quick. She has told me that I was 'not her choice, and I will not obtrude myself upon her.'"

"She did not mean it ! She often says things carelessly and recklessly ; she does not comprehend how rash words can wound. You never were dearer to her than you are now, take my word for it."

"I never was dear to her ; and when her pride is soothed, she will cease to lament her loss of my affection."

"And has she lost it—irretrievably lost it ?"

"Dolly ! there are some points that cannot be discussed with any third person. There is no woman in the world whom I respect more entirely than yourself ; none in whom I could repose equal confidence. But there are subjects, you must know it yourself, which cannot be argued. Let this interview cease, and let it be as if it had never been ! I cannot, will not speak of the calamity that has overtaken me ; where my wife is concerned, I have nothing—literally nothing to say."

"But she is still your wife ; she is the mother of your children !"

"I can only remember that she is, or that she was, the mother of my son, whom she cruelly neglected—whose death-bed she deserted—and for unholy causes. Dolly—Mrs. Philip Osborne—I have no more to say !"

And without another word Frank left the room, and began to traverse the verandah without. Dolly did not essay to follow him ; no words of hers, now, had power to shake his set resolution ; and who was she that she should presume to intrude upon a sorrow such as his ? She would render Queenie no service, but rather the reverse ; if she persisted in appealing to the wronged and estranged husband, who was evidently determined to close the conversation.

Dolly went back to Queenie with an aching heart ; and she consented to stay for a few days with her forsaken friend, who was suffering deeply from her husband's estrangement, and from the solitude, too, that became every hour more and more unsupportable. But Dolly had home-ties of her own ; she had a husband who required

her, and children who called for her ; and she knew that her adopted parents would mourn her absence. For *they* did not know how sadly and completely Queenie and her husband were severed, or they would have been far more than willing to relinquish to their darling such consolation as remained to her.

At last, after the expiration of a full week, Dolly was fain to acknowledge that nearest duties called her back to "The Acacias," and she wrote to Philip, bidding him expect her that very afternoon. He had better send the carriage for her ; she wished he would come for her, himself ; for there was just a hope that Frank might not refuse to discuss with him the subject that lay so near to their hearts. For Queenie, faulty as she was, was Philip's well-beloved sister ; and he and Frank had been for many a year attached friends and brethren. Perhaps men understood each other more fully than any woman could hope to understand them ! Perhaps an hour with Philip might break the very barriers that Frank had imposed upon himself.

But when the two met, nothing transpired. Philip felt that were he in Frank's position he should have resented most bitterly such interference as he had come prepared for ; he would have been almost tempted to defy the man who should have presumed to penetrate the secret of his soul ! One look at Frank's set countenance was enough ; a few minutes of that strange, dead silence was quite sufficient to repress any possible expression of sympathy. And Philip listened to Queenie's story, and sympathised with her kindly, blaming her less than she had anticipated ; but he insisted on carrying back his wife to her own house in time for dinner. He thought Dolly looked fagged and worn, and in every way the worse for the strain which had been put upon her.

And then the dreary days went on and on, and Queenie mourned her losses in perpetual tears ; for, as she sadly argued to herself, she had lost everything in the world save her little daughters ; and even the sight of them in their black frocks was a mute reproach, and reminded her of the one child so little valued in life, and so passionately deplored in death. Few persons came to the house, for

she had given a general order that nobody should be admitted ; the servants were to say that Mrs. Howard was too ill, and far too much depressed to receive her friends, and the regular "at home" on Fridays was to be discontinued until further notice was given.

So the weeks passed, and Frank made no sign. He had established himself in a suite of rooms connected with the library, which was in a wing of the house supposed to be entirely at his disposal, and connected by a private staircase with the children's nurseries. He was very little at home, for his uncle had become much worse ; and business demanded his constant attention. He dined almost every day at his club, and Queenie and he never met ; she would not, could not, indeed, venture to intrude herself unasked. A sort of inexplicable shyness, akin to actual timidity, stole over her, and she sometimes spent hours in planning a sudden visit—that should seem as chance—to the rooms that had come to be regarded as—to her—*forbidden ground*. She was understood by all in the house to be seriously indisposed ; but, of course, the servants knew well enough that master and mistress had fallen out, and as good as lived separate lives ; and they were by no means unacquainted with the source of the quarrel, which Victorine had done her best to make public downstairs, all the blame being imputed to that "cruel, tyrannical, jealous *M. le Mari*."

Susan and her mistress never met, for the old servant could not forgive Queenie for the part she had taken on that most deplorable evening when she left her dying child ; but Susan was a faithful retainer, and esteemed the family discredit as her own, so that she maintained a strict reserve on the subject in which the others were so deeply interested. She waited occasionally on her master, who evidently preferred her attendance to that of any other person ; for was she not old enough to be his mother ? and had she not nursed him through a sickly infancy and delicate childhood ? Mrs. Howard never appeared in the little girls' nursery ; and when they paid their "pretty mamma" a visit in her own private rooms, which she scarcely ever left now, they were attended by Deborah and Rachel, their own

especial maid, who had been with them almost from their birth. Queenie went, however, every night to the room where they slept, and kissed them as they lay, and sometimes shed bitter tears as she bent over their pretty cots.

But she never entered any other room on that corridor ; she shuddered at the bare notion of paying a visit to the apartment where she had taken a last farewell of her son, as he rested in his flower-decorated coffin.

Though comporting herself as an invalid, Queenie refused to see any medical man ; she avoided, too, as far as she could, all Victorine's obsequious attendance ; she rejected her condolences, and she repelled, with a certain *hauteur*, that deeply hurt the feelings of the Parisian waiting-maid, all attempts at any kind of confidential sympathy. And so the time wore away, and it was November once more, and Queenie knew that the grand Pavilion Ball, which she had pledged herself to attend, was very near at hand. Of course there had ceased to be any question of that once pleasurable gaiety. She could not go to Brighton in deep mourning, and unaccompanied by her husband ; she could not appear in public unescorted ; and, above all, she had lost all relish for the scenes which had once been so dear, so prized, and so charming. But the very thought of what was to have been caused her intensest pain, and she longed to be able to think of the revel as past and over.

For a while Queenie abandoned herself to wild despair and passionate grief ; then she became apathetic, and finally sullen, telling herself many times a day that she cared for nothing—that it mattered very little to her whatever should betide. But presently the sullenness vanished, and gave place to a vindictive feeling, while a strong desire to be avenged took possession of her soul ; and she pondered long and thoughtfully how best she could wring the heart of her offended husband. In after days Queenie declared that the Devil entered into her ; and certainly that the spirit of all evil did tempt her to sin and shame there cannot be any reasonable doubt. She was inspired by a sudden desire to return to society, though not the "society" whose envied favourite and ornament she had been so long. She ardently wished for Leonora's counsel and sympathy ; she even felt

as if she would be re-instated in her old self-complacency—in her old good opinion of herself—could she but listen for a while to the compliments and delicate flatteries of Count Alexis. And at this point of her musings she gave a sudden start, while a burning colour stole over cheek and brow, and then retreated, leaving her pallid and cold as death !

For how could she more certainly and more fully satisfy her thirst for revenge ? How could she more horribly torture her recreant husband than by coupling her name with that of the man who had been from the beginning of the dispute a source of dissension ? Frank had ceased to value her—he had ceased to worship and adore ; he had ceased to love her ! Why not indemnify herself, and at the same time punish the one who deserved punishment, by listening, as she had never listened before, to the blandishments that had always gratified her vanity, though they had never for a moment touched her heart ? Why should she not see Alexis again ? Why should she not receive such consolations as her faithful Leonora would certainly offer ? Why not go at once to Leonora, and take counsel with her ? Her fortune was her own—her very own—to do exactly as she chose with. Her husband could not deprive her of it ! He could only hold her up to shame and contumely—he could only take from her the companionship of her children ! But things need not be pushed as far as that. It would be quite enough if Frank suffered sufficiently to make him repent the sorrow and humiliation he had so unfeelingly inflicted on her. Surely he would awake to a sense of his own misdeeds—he would regret most bitterly his hardness and coldness—he would be almost at her feet again, when he discovered—as he would imagine, *too late*—that he had alienated her affections—that he was no more to her than he had done his best to prove ; than she was to him !

Surely the Wicked One knows all our vulnerable places ! He knows the weakest points of the citadel ; he understands when, where, and how it is best to make the attack ! He knew that Queenie was not what the world would call a wicked woman, but she was a weak one ; and her long-fostered vanity was the quicksand on which she might more

easily be wrecked. She reflected a little while ; *was* the game worth the candle ? Might she not suffer more—far more than she calculated upon ? Might not Frank take her for the shameless woman she was not *yet* ? Might she not be held up to the finger of scorn ? Might not her family be hopelessly disgraced—might not her conduct bring down to the grave the grey, dishonoured hairs of her too-indulgent father and mother ?

Next day, however, after having “slept on it,” as she said, Queenie decided that she would pay Leonora an impromptu visit. Mrs. Macnamara had written to her several times, and her graceful little notes had hitherto remained unanswered ; now the compliment should be returned, and old debts of courtesy paid off, as it were. She knew that Leonora was still at her own house at Linlithgow Place ; she would be going down to Brighton in a few days, “the season” at *London-super-Mare* now being at its very height. And Leonora quite expected to meet her “sweet Queenie” at the *Grand* ; though, of course, public festivities were for this year out of the question.

Queenie lunched, and was just about to ring the bell to order her carriage, when suddenly it struck her that it would be quite as well, all things considered, to go in less state than usual to Linlithgow Place. Besides, she remembered that one of the horses had fallen lame ; and it was quite upon the cards that the coachman might demur to her commands—perhaps pleading as excuse that his master had desired him not to go for so long a drive, just at present. Certainly, it was a long way ; and she did not wish, for reasons of her own, that Mrs. Howard’s carriage and liveries should be seen waiting at Mrs. Macnamara’s door ; it would answer her purpose very much better to take the train, though she had but scant idea of what line of rail she must select in order to arrive at her intended destination.

She hunted up a *Bradshaw*, and found that she could very easily accomplish her design ; she could start from Mortlake, but she would have to change her train, at least once, before she reached the neighbourhood of Linlithgow Place, with which she was tolerably familiar. It was the first time she had ventured beyond her own gates since her

unhappy experience at *The Greyhound*, and her fingers trembled—how wasted they had become since that ever-memorable evening! as she tied on the close black bonnet she had never worn before. She had felt a certain dislike to Victorine, ever since she had communicated to her little Frankie's death; it was an unreasonable aversion, she told herself, and she could not help it, or at all account for the sentiment; but whenever was Queenie quite rational in the likes and dislikes in which she indulged herself? On the present occasion she performed her toilet herself; for it was simple enough, and she could very well dispense with the services of her all-accomplished maid.

She made the journey quite successfully; she found the very train that would take her directly on her way, just approaching the platform as she stepped from the ticket-office. In a few minutes she reached the point where she must change for another line, and she had not to wait more than a few minutes for her train. Her usual good fortune attended her, she whispered to herself, as the guard shut the door of the first-class carriage. Ah! she was still fortune's favourite! Might it be so to the end; might chagrin and disappointment, which had menaced her of late, never—*never* be her lot! The walk from the station to Linlithgow Place, was not a long one, and she found herself in the trim, well-kept little front-garden of No. 5 almost before she thought it possible.

Was Mrs. Macnamara at home? The maid, who recognised Mrs. Howard, replied that she was not; but that she would certainly be in very shortly! Would Mrs. Howard wait a little in the drawing-room?

“No; I think not,” was Queenie's answer. “It is just the time for callers, and I had rather not meet any one, for I have been very ill, and am quite unfit to see any one but most intimate friends! Besides, I particularly wish to speak with your mistress alone; I will wait in Mrs. Macnamara's little snugery, I think, if it is unoccupied.”

“Yes,” said Annette; for Leonora kept a particularly smart and agreeable parlour-maid; “it is quite empty, and Madam can make herself as comfortable as she pleases, and be altogether undisturbed. No one ever is shown into that



room except by special permission. I will bring you a cup of tea immediately!"

"Thank you," said Queenie, and she languidly followed Annette to the drawing-room landing. The room into which she was ushered she knew very well; none but *des intimes* were ever welcomed there. Annette called the tiny apartment "the boudoir"; but Leonora, in talking of it to her very particular friends, nearly always spoke of it as "the snugery"; and by that cosy name Queenie generally thought of it.

It was, indeed, very small—a mere closet—but tastefully furnished; and it was almost impossible to accommodate more than two people within its rose-lined walls. Leonora frequently sat there alone; but she never received more than one guest at a time, and that one was supposed to be the most privileged of all the lady's friends. A good fire was burning in the bright, well-polished little grate; the floor was covered with a soft crimson carpet into which the foot sank noiselessly; a pale gold fleecy rug was on the hearth; there was a couch and an easy-chair, with plenty of luxurious cushions and tiny foot-stools ready for use, but strictly limited in number. The room—snugery or boudoir—was planned for *têtes-à-tête*; it was just meant to be *à deux*, and nothing more, Leonora assured her visitors.

It looked very inviting to Queenie, who was really tired and weak with long confinement to the house; the short railway journey had been quite too much for her, and she was more faint and weary than had been her wont on all former occasions. But then she had always visited Linlithgow Place in her own comfortable carriage. She had never before travelled hither in any other way. She felt really thankful for the excellent cup of tea that Annette, true to her word, almost immediately presented. But, though Annette was a most excellent servant—and, as Leonora often boasted, "quite perfectly trained!"—she had one little defect not altogether uncommon in young persons of her degree—she had a treacherous memory! She quite forgot, when she found it necessary to leave the house on her own especial business, to mention to her *pro-tem* substitute—a busy kitchenmaid, who was rather proud of

discharging the functions of her superior in the limited establishment—that she had shown Mrs. Howard to the boudoir; and that she was on no account to be disturbed.

Now the boudoir was so situated right behind the drawing-room to which general visitors were admitted, that it would certainly have figured as “back drawing-room” in any house only just a little larger; and it communicated with the larger apartment in front by a door always draped on both sides by heavy *portières*. Queenie felt all the better for her tea; but soon after she had emptied her delicate porcelain cup she began to be very drowsy; drowsier than she had been for she did not know how long! She had taken no sleeping potion, and yet the fragrant herb acted as a decided sedative; the truth being that Queenie had slept ill over-night, and that she was unusually wearied with the journey, while the weather had suddenly changed to extreme frigidity. The warmth of the small, close room acted likewise as a soporific; the deliciously easy sofa, with its downy cushions, and its comfortable Afghan blanket, seemed to woo her to repose. Why should she not indulge in a little nap while Leonora tarried? The house was very quiet; it was quite easy to have a little sleep—the sleep which she really needed, to restore her to her wonted brilliance and composure.

So as the minutes slowly passed, and no sound broke the stillness save the silvery tones of the gilded timepiece in the drawing-room on the other side of the curtained door, she threw herself on the inviting couch, took off her bonnet, arranged the satin pillows exactly to her satisfaction, drew over her knees the cosy knitted rug, and calmly resigned herself to the advances of the god of sleep.

How long she had slumbered peacefully she could not in the least imagine, when she was awakened by a sound of voices in the other room. It was quite dark now, the fire was burning low in the grate, and afforded just enough light to enable her to distinguish where she actually was. She felt, too, still extremely drowsy, and she was almost cross at the idea of her comfortable sleep being unnecessarily broken; for though she did not at first recognise the voices

that aroused her, she knew at once that neither of them was Leonora's. She shut her eyes and buried her head in the cushions, resolving not to allow her sleep to be really disturbed till her friend should make her appearance; but the delightful tranquillity in which her spirit had been wrapped was not to be regained.

For presently the voices on the other side of the door were raised, and Queenie at once knew one of them for Amoretta's. The other voice was much softer and sweeter in tone, but very distinct; and the involuntary eavesdropper was instantly convinced that it was that of Count Alexis von Langen, of Goldingen. Her first impulse was to rise and steal noiselessly away, for she wanted to speak awhile with Leonora before she conversed again with Alexis; as for Amoretta, she shrank from meeting her under any circumstances. She had taken an invincible dislike to her; the shrill sharp tones inspired her with the utmost repugnance; and she longed to escape out of hearing without a second of delay, while she groped about quite noiselessly for the bonnet she had thrown aside.

She found it at length on the floor, behind the sofa; and she sat down again, while she did her best to reduce to order the loose, dishevelled tresses which had become quite entangled during her repose. She had just succeeded in fastening up a refractory coil, when she heard her own name, and paused, not unnaturally, to hear what remark should follow.

"The little fool!—the stupid, vain-glorious little idiot!" Amoretta was saying. "If you do take her in tow, Alexis, you will repent it to the last hour of your life. I give you my word for it."

"She is a fool, I grant," replied Alexis, softly, but clearly; "at least, she is ridiculously credulous. You have only to butter the bread thickly enough, and the pretty simpleton will open her mouth and swallow it. She is not too particular either; the flattery may be rather gross, but it must be delicately served in order to minister to the unparalleled vanity of my lady Regina. Still, when all is said and done, it must be confessed that she is unsurpassably lovely. It would be something to possess so unrivalled a beauty even

for awhile ; and her coffers would be an immense advantage to ourselves, dear friend."

"Are you sure that her coffers will ever be at your disposal ?"

"As sure as a man can be. She has never repelled my advances ; she has never obstinately rebuffed me. She cares nothing for her respectable mule of a husband, and she cares as little as possible for her young children. It will not be immensely difficult to persuade her to break all ties ; she will leave husband and home fast enough if I can only make protestations sufficiently plausible to soothe her wounded pride. for I hear she and her husband are all but at daggers drawn. She must be persuaded to ensure ample revenge."

"Pride? She has none! Call it vanity—*gullibility*, rather! Never did a vainer woman wear shoe-leather. And as for her 'coffers,' I ask you again—are you assured that you will ever be allowed to help yourself ?"

"Why not? My pretty charmer is rich enough, and we know that her wealth is not exaggerated. Everything, as we have satisfactorily ascertained, is settled upon herself ; her husband may sue for a divorce, but he cannot withhold the immense fortune that came to her about ten years ago. I shall have the handling of a few of her thousands, never fear ! and you shall be the better for the golden prize, believe me, my brilliant Amoretta. Settlements are settlements, under any circumstances, my clever one."

"Yes ! settlements *are* settlements, there is no denying it ; but you do not understand our English laws, Alexis ; and it puts all sorts of insurmountable fences around an acknowledged heiress. Her father is her trustee, and he holds vast power in his hands. It is not generally known, but I have found out a few secrets. I have ascertained, that had the fair Queenie married without, or against, his sanction, she would have been more fettered than was at all agreeable to her high-and-mightiness. The will of the mysterious Mrs. Marmaduke Merridew was a very peculiar one. I have seen the copy of it, as I told you I would ; and you may thank your lucky stars, my clever gentleman, that I have. The principal of Queenie's grand fortune cannot be touched ; in case of her death, childless, it goes—I don't

know where, and don't care ; but it does go, every farthing of it. As things are at present, it reverts directly to her children—male or female.”

“ Well, she may live a long time yet ! The children may not have a chance of inheriting for many a long year. The interest of thirty thousand pounds will go far to keep both you and me in the lap of luxury, if we only play our cards discreetly. Of course, we will live abroad—all three of us. Incomes go so much farther on the Continent, and one has so many chances there that never come to one in this accursed country. English law may be vexatious, and I am sure it is—horribly vexatious ! But it can be evaded, with a little dexterity, if one is pretty well out of its immediate power. And you know, Amoretta, *mia* ! I am no greenhorn—I was not born yesterday. And, as I said, the interest only of thirty thousand pounds is in no case to be despised.”

“ Ah ! if the interest were safe and sure ; but it is not. Every time Queenie draws a cheque for a certain sum—I think it is for five hundred pounds—Mr. Osborne has to affix his countersign. She cannot receive the money without that little ceremony ; and you know best whether it would be procurable if the fair Felicia Regina changed the highly respectable Frank Howard, Esq.'s, protection for yours—which, I am sorry to say, is *not* so entirely respectable as it might be.”

“ You are *quite* sure that the old gentleman's signature is absolutely requisite to the honouring of Mrs. Howard's cheques ? ”

“ As sure as I am about anything in the world. But ere you take the plunge, which will certainly involve you in countless dilemmas, you had better pay your shilling, and read the important document for yourself.”

“ The old buffer may depart this life. He is no chicken, I am told. He cannot be far short, if at all, of seventy.”

“ His demise would make no difference, except for the worse. On his death, Queenie's two elder brothers—and they are stiff Puritans, and believe in nothing that is not essentially English—take the father's place. Nothing would ever induce *them* to condone anything ; they would never

in any way endorse their sister's dishonour. To run off with your beautiful Queenie may cost you too dearly, Alexis! What damages may not the injured husband claim? English juries can be as unreasonable as unmerciful; and the Osbornes will hunt you down, even if Frank Howard leave you unmolested, be well assured! You have nothing wherewith to bear the brunt of the charges, remember! and the countersigned cheques will render it impossible for you to pay either costs, *or* damages, out of Queenie's full pockets!"

"The way would be to draw only cheques within a specified amount. Any number, within a certain limit, might be cashed, I suppose, provided the sum were well *under* the fatal five hundred?"

"I cannot say; but I should imagine this is not the case. I am afraid, my poor Alexis, that if you take the desperate plunge you will find all your grand plans defeated; and you will simply be saddled with the incubus of a very lovely vixen, who is no better than a tiresome, dreadfully-naughty, hopelessly spoilt child."

"Spoilt as she is, I would soon bring her into training! Once under my control I would hold the reins too tightly for her to rebel to any definite purpose. As soon as she is fairly compromised, and all hope of cajoling her forsaken lord and master at an end, I shall give her to understand that she must honour and obey—even if she do not love—far more distinctly than she has ever dreamed of doing under the present *régime*. She shall go my way, and not her own; my will, not hers, shall be the rule of our domestic arrangements. Once let her be compromised in the eyes of all the world without any chance of retrieving her position, and she will discover that I am not to be trifled with. I shall commence as I intend to go on; I shall inaugurate my reign with a severity which will a little astonish her delicate nerves."

"I hate Queenie Howard with all my heart; but I shall pity her if she fall into the web, which you are weaving for her entanglement. You may succeed in making her your own, poor weak little fool that she is! but you will never be able to appropriate any appreciable part of her property.

Be as cunning as you will, that *countersigning* business will baffle you, and confound your every little scheme."

"But signatures can be *managed*, I should say! There are more ways of killing a dog than hanging him. And Queenie herself will not thank her trustee-father for keeping her in a state of impecuniosity. All those little difficulties can be surmounted when one has accomplished friends, and one is not too scrupulous to avail oneself of what society would stigmatise as fraudulent assistance!"

"Alexis Von Langen! if you once attempt to play that little game, you are—well, what the Yankees would call 'a gone coon!' You are a ruined man, for I know—though you do not—what the English law really is! I understand all about treaties of extradition. And I know what you may have to expect from these wealthy, highly-respectable British Nonconformists. They will hunt you down in whatever hole you may hide your guilty head. Be persuaded, Alexis—be *warned*! and leave all women—however beautiful and credulous, in Queenie's well-guarded position—safely alone. But if she be fool enough to listen to your sophistries—which, I know only too well, are plausible and persuasive, then be prepared to pay the extreme price for your amusement. Above all, never try to mend matters by committing *forgery*! There; the ugly word is out. It is best, upon occasion, to call a spade—a *spade*!"

How long the conversation lasted between this precious pair Queenie never knew. The curtained door between the boudoir and the drawing-room was well ajar, and the sofa on which she had reposed so sweetly was drawn quite closely against the inner *portière*. It followed, therefore, that without the least effort the unhappy lady heard every word that fell from the lips of those who would fain have played the part of her destroyers. At first she listened—trembling and horrified at her position; then as sensation seemed failing her, she strained every nerve to catch the full revelation of the dastardly plot that was being woven for her destruction. She heard the whole—Amoretta's loud, harsh speeches, and Alexis's soft, hurried tones; and she understood, as if by sudden intuition, the

depth of the frightful precipice to the very brink of which she had insanely wandered.

Leonora at length returned, and found her "snuggery" in utter darkness. But Annette had told her that Mrs. Howard was awaiting her in that favoured retreat; and, a lamp being brought, poor Queenie was discovered cold and senseless on the fleecy hearth-rug. And when the guilty couple in the drawing-room heard where she had spent the last hour or so, they fully comprehended the cause of her sudden insensibility, for they knew that she *must* have overheard every syllable of the conversation which they had quite believed to be "private and confidential." And, of course, they understood that the entire plot was disclosed—for Queenie, vain and foolish as she undoubtedly was, had been in the full possession of her senses; and no amount of explanation could possibly convince her that such and such words had not been uttered in her own hearing. The situation was so damaging that it was idle to think of repairing the breach that must for ever be between them. For—as Amoretta sagely remarked, quoting Holy Writ with most unholy lips—"Surely in vain the net is spread in the sight of any bird."



## CHAPTER XLI.

### THE EARTHQUAKE.

IT was late at night when Queenie returned to full consciousness. By slow degrees she regained her senses; feeling at first not a little bewildered as she looked around and found herself in an unfamiliar place.

Very slowly, and with an almost painful effort, she began to remember and to comprehend. She was not in her own house; something had happened, and something of an unpleasant nature, though what it was she could not very



easily recall. By degrees the scene in which she had borne a part dimly returned to her ; the voices to which she had listened were silent now, but their echoes still rang in her ears, and little by little the words spoken returned to her recollection. She felt very weak and faint, and almost unable to follow out any distinct train of thought ; but memory once roused was not to be repelled. It all came back to her : the conversation that she had so involuntarily overheard ; the perfidy of Alexis ; the sneers and taunts and unkindly criticisms of the woman who would henceforth be esteemed as little better than her deadly enemy.

Yes ; she remembered it all—the short railway journey, the brief colloquy with Annette, the quiet dreamy interval in the unoccupied “snuggery !” and then the astonishment, the horror, the mingled terror and resentment with which she had listened ; and at last the sense of falling down, *down*, DOWN ! as it seemed to her, into some dread unfathomable abyss. She had fainted, she supposed, fallen insensible to the floor, and been discovered in such woeful plight by Leonora, or by some one else, and undressed and carried off into the nearest bedroom.

Yes ; this was Leonora’s house, and this was her spare chamber, into which Queenie could dimly remember having glanced on some former occasion. But where was Leonora, and where were the intriguing pair who had been discussing her, and her possible fate—as she fancied—half an hour ago ? She *must* have fainted, she concluded, and for the only time in her life ; and her first impulse was to spring up and don her clothes, which she perceived lying across a chair only a yard or two away. She would dress immediately, and, without any notice of her intention, leave the house as speedily as possible. How she was to regain her own home she could not quite understand ; but once in the open air, in the bright gaslight of the public streets, and the world going on its ordinary way, she doubted not that she would be able to gain the railway station, or, at least, to find some hackney conveyance that would take her into a more familiar neighbourhood.

She started up impatiently, for the most direful apprehensions had presented themselves to her dismayed mind

she feared she knew not what, and gave Leonora credit for the worst intentions. Suppose she should attempt to detain her at Linlithgow Place ; suppose she, and Amoretta, and the false Alexis, should be in league to keep her a prisoner there till she should be so far compromised as to render the task of explanation so difficult as to be next to impossible. She was about to spring from the bed, when a sudden weakness overpowered her, the strange faintness returned, and she fell back on her pillow, feeling all aghast at the position in which she had so thoughtlessly placed herself. Here she was, ill and helpless, and in the power of her worst enemies ; no one in the world knew where she was ; it might even be imagined that she had eloped—and in company with the treacherous, designing Count. She felt so exhausted, so helpless, so forlorn, that she burst into tears, and cried aloud to the husband who was she knew not where—but most certainly well out of hearing.

“God help me !” was her involuntary prayer, as she struggled once more into a sitting posture ; and again gasped, as the deadly faintness came over her and compelled her to resume her recumbent position. She dreaded equally being left in this miserable condition, or being attended to by any of the people of the house. Oh, if only she could summon sufficient strength and energy for the emergency ! Oh, why had she so madly thrown herself into the arms of her perfidious and most unscrupulous so-called “friends” ? Oh, for the peace of Oakenshaw—oh, for the safe shelter of her husband’s protection !

While she ruminated thus sadly, she perceived the door softly opening, and the maid, Annette, stealthily making her appearance. “Ah ! thank heaven, madam is recovering,” exclaimed the girl, coming up to the bedside ; “I must go and call my mistress, who is in the deepest anxiety on madam’s account. It has been such a long and deathlike swoon !”

“Have I fainted ?” asked Queenie, striving to rally her forces. “It is Annette, is it not ? What has been the matter with me ?”

“Mrs. Macnamara found you on the hearthrug, in the boudoir, madam, and we all did our best, but could not

bring you to your senses again. My mistress sent for the nearest doctor, who lives just round the corner ; but he was not at home. I will go at once and assure her that you are yourself again."

"Annette, I will see Mrs. Macnamara, but no one else. Remember that I forbid any one else to approach me."

"My mistress is quite alone ; no one else will venture to come near you. She went down-stairs to snatch a little refreshment, for she was so utterly worn out. She left me on guard, as one may say, and I had just gone to look for something in the medicine chest when the attack began to pass off."

It mattered very little to Queenie what excuses might be offered ; her only anxiety was to get up, and leave the house she had so rashly entered ; and while she was trying to compose herself Annette quietly went her way. In another moment Leonora was in the room. "My poor, dear love, how you have frightened me ! I am so glad the faintness is passing ; are you subject to such terrible attacks ?"

"No ; I never fainted outright before. Leonora, I want to go home !"

"But you cannot, my sweet Queenie ; you are far too ill to get up—to go away ! You must rest quietly till the morning, then I will take you home myself. You can send for your carriage, if you wish it."

"But, Leonora, I cannot stay—I must not. What will Mr. Howard think if I do not return ?"

"It will not hurt him to come and seek you. A little solitude is good for these husbands of ours, believe me. You must lie quite still, and try to sleep, when you have taken some food. In the morning you will feel another thing."

"I cannot take any food ; and I could not sleep away from home. And, Leonora, I may as well tell you that I overheard the whole conversation between Amoretta and the Count ; and Amoretta, I am certain, is a very wicked, dangerous woman, and not at all the person she represents herself to be."

"What conversation do you mean ? Why, you have been dreaming ! There has been no conversation of any kind to

overhear. You have fancied it, that is all ; one is subject to the strangest delusions under these attacks, I know. Neither the Count nor Amoretta has been here ; I fancy the Count is not in London, nor near it."

"Leonora, you cannot deceive me. Do not think it is possible any longer to impose upon me ; and, if you have any kindness, help me to get away—help me back to Oakenshaw."

"Do you know what time it is ?"

"No ; only I suppose it is getting late. Let Annette come and help me to dress ; my hands tremble so. And if I might have just a glass of wine, to put some life into me."

"You shall have it. I will go and fetch you some directly, and when you have drunk it Annette shall come and dress you."

Very quickly Mrs. Macnamara returned with the wine, which Queenie drank eagerly, in the hope that she might regain strength enough to set out on the return journey. Then she lay quite still, feeling very much recovered, but, at the same time, not at all inclined to exert herself. The fact being that Leonora had, with no really unkind intention, administered a potent sedative, which should compose her patient for the next few hours, and induce the sleep which should fit her for the necessary travelling. Leonora, though not so soundly principled as she might have been, was not really a *bad* woman, and she felt sorry for the hapless young wife, who had placed herself in no very enviable situation, and who had in some sort fallen a victim to her own specious misrepresentations. At the same time, she also had been to a certain extent deluded by both Amoretta and Alexis, who were people of the most unscrupulous and designing character. All the Count's plans were hopelessly defeated. Mrs. Howard's credulity could be practised upon no longer, the guilty pair had unwittingly disclosed their inmost souls, and revealed their cherished secrets in her very ears ! All that could be done now was to make the best of a tiresome mishap, soothe the alarmed Queenie, and restore her with all possible expedition to her forsaken home.

Of course she slept ; and when Leonora had seen that her slumbers were profound enough to remain undisturbed, she hastened downstairs, and despatched a telegram to Mr. Howard, simply apprising him of the fact that his wife was slightly invalided, and would remain for the night where she was, returning early in the morning to Oakenshaw. And it was morning, and the neighbourhood of Linlithgow Place was awakening to its daily cares and duties, when Queenie succeeded in rousing herself to a true sense of her equivocal position. Her head ached from the effects of the soporific she had taken, but she felt comparatively strong, and quite fit for the journey that was before her. She dressed herself with all expedition, and was ready to leave the house when Leonora made her appearance.

It was in vain that Mrs. Macnamara gave her own version of the story ; Queenie would listen to no excuse—to no prevarications. She was in her cloak and bonnet and quite prepared to set out ; she declined all offers of breakfast, which Leonora pressed upon her ; and at the same time refused to accept the company of her hostess, who would fain have escorted her to Oakenshaw.

“ At any rate, I will go with you to our nearest cab-stand,” said Leonora, as her involuntary guest rose to depart ; “ you cannot prevent my going with you into the square where the carriages are kept, though I think you had better let me send for one. A private *landau* can be at the door in five minutes.”

“ Thank you—*no* ! I prefer to walk ; I know my way,” was Mrs. Howard’s determined response.

“ Well, you must take your own way, of course ; but you will certainly not leave my house alone. I shall see you into the carriage.”

“ As you choose ! But it will be for your own pleasure and not for mine ! I desire no one’s attendance !” and Queenie spoke in her coldest, haughtiest tones.

“ Very well ! Only remember, Queenie, that *I* have not been untrue to you ; I am not in any way responsible for what occurred last night ; the revelations, if they were realities——”

“ You *know* they were realities ! I am to be ‘*gulled*’ no longer ; I bid you adieu for ever, Mrs. Macnamara.”

"And you throw me over for a dream—a fancy! Oh, faithless Queenie!"

"We will not argue the matter. I have been in the full possession of my senses ever since I entered this house—save when I slept and when I fainted. Allow me to wish you a good morning!"

And in two minutes Mrs. Howard had folded her ample robes about her, descended the stairs, opened the front door for herself, and was quickly out of the garden and into the public road. She did not look back; and she never saw Leonora Macnamara again. Figuratively—if not literally—she shook off the dust from her feet, as a testimony against these falsest of friends! The neighbouring square was soon reached; a carriage was found, and the driver was quite ready and willing to take her any reasonable distance, in the shortest possible time, for the liberal terms she proffered. She thought afterwards that the man had probably mistaken her for some criminal escaping from the pursuit of justice.

Once more she was at Oakenshaw, and all looked just as it had looked when she left it on the preceding day. Mrs. Forester came to meet her mistress, and inquire of her welfare; "I hope, madam, you are better; I hope your indisposition has not been in any way serious?"

"I am much better, thank you; quite myself again; but how did you know I was unwell, Forester?"

"Of course, Mrs. Macnamara telegraphed—as we supposed, at your request."

"She did not tell me. To whom was the telegram addressed?"

"To the master. And he gave the paper into my hands, and bade me dismiss the maids as early as I pleased. They were none of them disinclined for a long night's sleep; only Susan staid up, talking with the master."

"Have you the telegram still?"

"It is in my sitting-room, madam. You shall have it immediately."

It was brought accordingly, and Queenie read Mrs. Macnamara's message. It was from Mrs. Macnamara, of Linlithgow Place, to Mr. Frank Howard, of Oakenshaw.

It ran thus : "*Mrs. Howard indisposed, and remaining for the night. Will return home betimes to-morrow morning.*"

Queenie was annoyed, because she had been in nowise privy to this brief despatch ; she knew, too, that Frank would be exceedingly vexed at receiving any kind of communication—even telegraphic—from so objectionable a person. He would think the "indisposition" a mere blind ; at the best, a plausible excuse for setting his authority at defiance, in thus passing a night under the roof of one so expressly condemned by himself. Oh, that she had not fainted ! Oh, that she had had courage and spirit enough to enter the drawing-room and confront the despicable couple ! Oh, that she had been able to scathe them with her lightning glance, and then leave the house for ever—leave it a sadder and a wiser woman !

"Is Mr. Howard at home now ?" was Queenie's next inquiry ; for she was fully determined to go to him, to force her presence upon him, if necessary, to fling herself at his feet, and implore his forgiveness, without a moment's hesitation.

"No, madam," was the housekeeper's reply. "The master had another telegram early this morning. It was from one of Mr. Howard, senior's, people, to say that he was at the point of death. Master called for a cup of coffee, and was off for Kensington by eight o'clock."

"Did he leave no message for me ?"

"None at all, madam ; he left neither message nor directions for any one. He was quite too much concerned and too greatly hurried."

Queenie required some breakfast herself for she had really taken nothing since the cup of tea and the slice of thin bread-and-butter served by Annette in the never-to-be forgotten "snuggery."

Mrs. Forester hastened to bring in what Victorine called "*Un petit déjeuner à la fourchette*," and her mistress detained her in conversation while she trifled with her chicken and her coffee, earnestly hoping that she might be able to glean some information as to her husband's tone and manner previous to his departure. But nothing was to be learned, though Queenie led the discourse with all

possible tact and dexterity. The fact was, that if she had directly questioned her housekeeper—a proceeding which both pride and delicacy forbade—no news would have been imparted. For Mr. Howard had never mentioned his wife's name ; he had not made the slightest reference to her. Such orders as he had to issue had been already given to Susan, who was still supposed to be the leading authority in the nursery.

And Susan actually had asked of her master, "What shall I say, sir, to the mistress when she gets back home?"

And Mr. Howard's reply had been, "Whatever you think best, Susan. I have no message for anybody. You can tell Mrs. Forester of my uncle's hopeless condition."

And this was all. But brief as was this colloquy, Susan kept it to herself ; so that Mrs. Howard remained in the profoundest ignorance of her husband's state of mind. She could only fear that his displeasure was rather increased than otherwise, and that he would become more obdurate and estranged than ever.

So the day passed wearily away, and again it was late in the evening ; but no news arrived as to Mr. Howard's probable detention at Kensington. It grew to midnight, and Queenie was fain to go to bed, thankful that, at any rate, she was well away from Linlithgow Place, and comforted even by the sight of her own chairs and tables. She did not sleep well, for the potion Leonora had administered, though composing enough at the time, had far from salutary after-effects. And her first movement in the morning was to require that her breakfast should be brought to her by Mrs. Forester, and not by Victorine, who comprehended that she had in some way fallen into disgrace.

The housekeeper made her appearance as soon as she knew that her lady required her attendance, and asked what was her pleasure. And Mrs. Howard replied, "Simply that I am tired of Victorine's services. I prefer that you should wait upon me yourself ; it is very little personal attendance that at present I require."

"Certainly, madam. Your bell shall be answered by myself. Should you wish me to dismiss Victorine?"



"Yes! No! I hardly know what to say. But I have taken a dislike to her, and it is decidedly unpleasant to have a person about you towards whom you feel a sort of aversion!"

"Undoubtedly, madam. Am I to understand that Victorine has failed in any duty? Have you something against her?"

"Again I must answer 'Yes' and 'No.' The truth is, Forester, that I cannot bear her to come near me. I cannot bear the rustle of her dress; I hate to hear her soft, purring voice. I am afraid I am unreasonable—sadly irritable. And she is somehow connected, in my mind, with that night when my dear boy died. She was not in fault in any way, but she always brings back painful memories, and I cannot help it."

"She is not a favourite in the servants' hall. Waiting-maids very seldom are, I think. But I will act in your name, madam, if you wish it. I will pay her her just wages, and dismiss her; or retain her for some other service not so closely connected with yourself. It is just as you desire, madam."

"Very well; dismiss her, then. I will draw a cheque presently for what is her due, and a little over. Let me know when she is gone. And, Forester, is there any news of your master this morning?"

"Not that I know of, madam. But Mrs. Susan may have had a letter. The postman came about an hour ago."

Queenie hesitated a moment; then she resolved to humble herself. "Forester," she said, in a low, half-broken voice, "you know, I feel sure, that Mr. Howard was deeply displeased at my unfortunate absence from home on that most miserable night. I have never forgiven myself, and never shall. But he has cherished a certain amount of resentment which he evinces in several ways; and that is why he left no proper message for me when he went away yesterday morning. Now, I want you to go to Susan, and ask her if there be any news from Kensington."

"Yes, madam."

"It seems strange to have to make such an inquiry, and from my own servant. But Mr. Howard was Susan's nursling

forty years ago, and is perhaps his *confidante*, I am not sure. She is very faithful, and doubtless censures me severely, for she always sides with her master, and thinks ill of all with whom he is displeased. Still, I *must* know something, and she can satisfy my anxiety if she will. Go to her, Forester."

And feeling most deeply humiliated at this little episode—which so nearly approached a confession—Queenie waited, half patiently, and altogether penitently, for her envoy's return. She came at length, with the news that "Mrs. Susan" had received a letter that morning from Mr. Howard; and she had sent it, in accordance with Mrs. Forester's earnest request, for her mistress's own reading.

The letter consisted of a very few lines. Frank's uncle was *dead*; he had had some kind of "stroke," and sensibility was never regained. He had died on the preceding evening; precisely twenty four hours after the final seizure. There was affectionate remembrance of his little daughters, and a few loving words for them; but not the slightest mention of his offending wife. Neither was there any word of his probable return. Queenie could scarcely restrain her tears when she understood this; and she wondered—oh! how sadly—whether she would receive any proper intimation of the solemn event. She said little, however; only desiring the housekeeper to attend to the orthodox darkening of the windows. As for herself, she felt that shadow and obscurity rested upon her very soul. And as the dreary hours passed, she wept abundantly.

The little girls came to pass a short time with their mother, before their bedtime; and she could scarcely speak, so muffled was her voice, so choked with the tears and sobs that had been her portion ever since the morning.

The children cried with her, and stroked her wet wan face with their little soft hands, exclaiming constantly, "Oh! poor mamma! dearest mamma! are you hurt, mamma? Has any one been scolding you?"

And Queenie could only answer: "Yes, my darlings! I am hurt, but it is my own fault! Mamma has been very naughty!"

"Mamma, *naughty*?" cried the amazed twins in unison.

"Poor mamma! she will be good again. Where is papa, to kiss her, and make her happy?"

At which innocent question the unhappy mother sighed profoundly, and gave vent to another burst of tears and sobs that were almost hysterical. The twins went back to the nursery, weeping bitterly, and confiding to Susan their apprehensions that mamma "would cry herself to death!"

It was not till the evening of the sixth day that Frank Howard returned to his home. Queenie was apprised of his arrival; and she sat shivering over the fire, in her own little sitting-room, wondering, with a sick, despairing wonder, whether she would be permitted to see him and speak with him. She had not seen her husband's face, nor heard his voice, save afar off, speaking to some other person, since their mournful parting in the corridor, some weeks before! It seemed so long, so very long, to the penitent wife, since she and Frank had met! And while she waited in her solitude, and hoped and feared, and tried to brace up her courage and go to him, and implore his pardon, she heard some unwonted sound close at hand; and her husband, once again, stood before her.

Her heart stood still, for the *hard* expression she so dreaded to perceive was on his once loving countenance. "Oh, Frank, be kind to me," she wailed, as he paused before uttering a word. "I am so *very* miserable."

"I am not surprised at that," he coldly returned; "we are all bound to reap what we have sown, yourself—fortune's petted favourite—not excepted. But that is a question that needs not to be discussed; I came here to speak with you, because it was inevitable. It is necessary that you should know the changes that have betided."

"What changes? I know of none, except in you and in me. *We* are sadly changed; you no longer love me, or trust me; and our precious boy is gone. I am changed, too, for I am penitent and broken-hearted."

"I did not refer to our personal experiences. On the night you left your dying child to consort with your disreputable associates, *I changed*, I know; and as I told you then, for all time. But I have to speak to you of our present circumstances, our worldly affairs, which also are

changed. You have been told, I suppose, that my uncle, whose heir I was supposed to be, is dead?"

"Yes; I learned it from the servants, and I saw the obituary in *The Times* newspaper."

"He was buried yesterday, and his will was read directly after the funeral."

"And you are *not* his heir?"

"I am his heir; but there is little or nothing to inherit. I have had my suspicions for the last few months; but I could not compel the poor old man to speak frankly. There has been fraud and treachery somewhere; no doubt there has been a horrible mess and complication of '*bills*,' which you would not understand if I explained them to you. It simply comes to this, that I am heir to nothing but debt and difficulty. When the affairs are satisfactorily wound-up, a trifle *may* remain; but that is more than we can certainly expect."

"I care nothing at all for money."

"That is because you never learned the value of it. And your own money, I am thankful to know, remains intact. That is to say, the £30,000 you brought with you at our ill-starred marriage, is yours still. The principal of your fortune has not increased; and, thanks to the restrictions under which you inherit, it has not diminished. It is yours, and yours only, for your life; and afterwards it must descend to your daughters. You will be comfortably off, Regina; and your father is wealthy."

"I am glad that my money is incontestably my own; but I am mostly thankful to think you will share it."

"Dismiss that thought from your mind. I cannot be dependent upon a wife who sets me at defiance—who goes her own evil way, in spite of every entreaty, every warning. I shall leave England in a few days, and you will have to leave this house; your means, which are ample for yourself, are insufficient to keep up an establishment such as this. You can choose your own residence—you are quite unfettered; you can do your own will; though I should strongly advise you to undertake nothing that is not sanctioned by your father and brothers."

"You will not take the children to—to—to where you are going?"

"No ; I will not deprive you of the children ; for I believe that if you love anything in the world you love your little daughters. But before I go to New Zealand I shall appoint as their guardians your two eldest brothers—James and John Osborne. Should you desert them—as I am sorry to say is by no means impossible, since I leave you free to go whither you will, and to choose your own friends, without any reference to the will or wish of your absent though lawful husband—I trust you will remember that you are their own mother, and that you owe, as in God's sight, true duty to them, though not to me."

"I am your wife ; my duty *is* to you ; even if you desert me, and go to the Antipodes ! You cannot *divorce* me, for I have not sinned—as the world counts sinning."

"No one speaks of divorce ! You will be my wife, in point of law, as long as you live. If I dreamed that you were a sinful woman, I should not leave my children in your care. You forfeited your rights as a wife when you joined yourself to that disreputable crew with whom you are *still* in league. A mother's rights, till she prove herself utterly unworthy, can *never* be forfeited. Keep yourself really worthy of your daughters' love and honour, and you will not be unhappy."

"I shall be most wretched if you forsake me."

"I think not ; though perhaps your pride may be somewhat abased. All fault of our separation may be laid at my door—the entire blame may be counted as mine. You can call it 'incompatibility of temper,' or what you will. When you are well accustomed to the change you will be happier without me than with me."

"How soon are you going—if you really mean to go ! Oh, Frank, you *don't* mean it ? You only say it to punish me—to threaten me !"

"I do mean it ! I go to a new country to begin a new, but lonely life ; I shall keep up my intercourse with my own land and with your family. As soon as my affairs are properly settled, I shall set sail for the other side of the world. I shall do my best to leave all things honourably and comfortably arranged. And, considering the course

matters have taken, I am inexpressibly thankful that you are provided for."

"And *you*? what is to become of you, if you refuse to share my income?"

"Do not trouble yourself on my account; I shall do very well. I have health and strength, I am still a comparatively young man; and I am ready and willing to fight my own way in the world, and to begin a fresh career. When all is done, I daresay I shall have a few hundreds left in my pocket, wherewith I may be able to lay the foundations of prosperity in another hemisphere. I am commencing somewhat late, it is true, but better late than never! Even yet I may die a millionaire! and, if so, I shall have carved out my own fortune. And yet I do not care about riches; I would rather leave my children a modest competency than vast wealth; you would have been happier, and you would have made me happier, had you been poorer."

"Do you say I must leave Oakenshaw?"

"I do say so; for fifteen hundred a year—and you can scarcely count upon more—will hardly keep up the place. You had better take counsel with your brother Philip as to future plans; I saw him yesterday, and explained to him how affairs had turned out. I conferred, too, with James and John, and they quite understand my position—and yours! You will not be alone in the world, and you have abundance for your needs. I leave you surrounded by your own people, and you have your children."

"*Our* children! If you renounce your wife, you surely will not renounce your children?"

"I would not for worlds renounce them—they are mine by every tie. But they are better under a mother's care for the present; they cannot be adequately looked after by a wandering father."

"You are cruel, Frank—hard and stern. And oh! I have given those people up entirely; you judged them rightly. They are utterly worthless; I have done with them."

"How am I to be certified that you are speaking the genuine truth?"

"I never lied to you ; I never lowered myself to falsehood."

"And yet you spent the night, a week since, under the roof of that despicable adventuress ?"

"I could not help myself. I remained entirely against my will ; I was really very unwell. Something happened—that gave me a shock."

"What was it ?"

"It would be difficult to explain,—and yet——"

"Enough ! I require no explanation ; I wish for none."

"I may say that I overheard a private conversation that convinced me of the worthlessness of those whom I had been idiot enough to count as my friends."

"I am thankful that your eyes are opened ; if I were quite sure that you were well out of the meshes of the snare that I feel certain was spread for you, I should be freed from a great source of anxiety on your behalf. I should leave you with greater security. But the past *is* the past, and it can never be recalled."

"When am I to leave Oakenshaw ?"

"I can scarcely tell you yet—but soon."

"And where am I to go ?"

"To your father and mother, of course. You can remain at Clapham till you have chosen your own abode. Mr. and Mrs. Osborne are quite ready to receive you ; and Dolly will come—and probably Philip—to aid you in breaking up the establishment here. Do not fear ; you will be thoughtfully cared for."

"Where are you going *now* ?"

"Where am I going to-day, do you ask ? I am returning to Kensington. There is much there that has to be attended to. There is a great deal of needful business to be transacted—business that cannot be neglected. Of course, the furniture and all the appointments of this great house will have to be disposed of, for everything will have to be given up. But I think—nay, I am sure—that your brothers will look well after your interests ; and you may select whatever it pleases you to retain."

"And to whom is everything to be 'given up' ?"

"To our creditors—the creditors of the long-established

firm of *Howard Bros.*, founded in the days of my great-grandfather, a full century ago. And I did not even guess the firm to be embarrassed. Till this hour I had no idea but that we had unlimited means at our command; I should as soon have expected the Bank of England to fail, or the Queen to declare herself bankrupt. It is only within the last few months that I have begun to have misgivings. A year or two ago, both James and John Osborne were uneasy, and wished me to withdraw from the business. Then my uncle fell into declining health, and I could not leave him to his own resources. He must have known that the whole edifice of the concern was crumbling into ruins, and on foundations of the most insecure nature; and the fatal knowledge, at his time of life, was too much for him. I cannot but wish he had been more frank. If I had only guessed at the real state of affairs, I might have been spared much, and I might have spared him something, for I would have faced the truth in all its grimness, and at any cost; now I have only to yield all—or nearly all—that I have, preserving for myself unblemished honour and an unstained name among men. My children will never have to blush that they were born *Howards*!”

“Do my father and mother fully understand that you are leaving *me*?”

“I have hidden nothing from them; your father knows what my intentions are.”

“And does he *approve*?”

“I cannot say he does. He will never approve of that which will cause you even temporary pain. But James and John, who are tried men of business—and who know perfectly that you are safely provided for, and that your independent fortune is inalienable—believe that I am acting for the best. Now I must leave you; I must not procrastinate; I have a thousand imperative, untransferable engagements.”

“You will come again? There are the children, even if you care nothing for me.”

“I do care for you, Queenie; I shall always care for you. Though we may never be as we have been, I cannot forget that you have been my loved and honoured wife, and the



mother of my little ones. Under any circumstances, we should have been sundered, as I warned you would be the case ; though I doubt whether, had my own fortunes taken a less disastrous turn, I should have put the wide ocean between us two. But, things being as they are, I think—I am sure—I am doing my best for all concerned. And James and John, and the others, down to Philip, see with me, and bid me God-speed.”

“ You are not leaving the country just yet ? Frank ! you will come to me again, if you really go to New Zealand ? And, if you must begin again in a new world, why should I not go with you ? ”

“ For many reasons your accompanying me is utterly undesirable—nay, it is impossible. A little solitude will do neither of us any harm, though I am not so sure that loneliness will be good for you. I think you had better not delay settling matters here. Dolly will come to you very soon, I am confident ; I should not wonder if you see her to-morrow. Consult with her, and with Philip—if he gives you an early opportunity—and decide as to the possessions you would wish to retain. Having made your selection, you had better give orders for packing, for the sale may be earlier than is anticipated.”

“ The ‘ *sale* ’ ! Can anything be more dreadful ? ”

“ Being *sold up* is always a calamity. The only consolation is that we have not exactly brought it upon ourselves. My uncle might have been more candid ; I might have been less careless, and have heeded the signs of the times, which I can see now, well enough, boded the rising and breaking of a heavy storm, that, when it came, would scatter our seemingly-settled and long-established prosperity to the hurricane. Other people, too, whom we have unhappily relied on, might have been more trustworthy. Still, if we cheerfully relinquish *everything*, save honour, I believe no one will be ultimately the worse for our misfortunes. We—that is, the old, well-known firm of ‘ Howard Bros.’—will leave to their contemporaries, and to posterity, a warning ; that is all ! Our history will be a lesson to our fellows—to all mercantile firms—not to rest in long-established successes, and above all, *never to let things drift*.”

"I do not understand ! I do not know what is meant by *drifting*, when applied to business, though I can dimly guess. I have heard of a boat drifting along quiet, peaceful streams, on to the fatal rapids ; while the voyagers never guessed or dreamed of the swiftly coming wreck, till it was too late to avoid the fall—to take necessary precautions. But I do comprehend that bankruptcy implies a complete surrender of all the possessions of the unfortunate bankrupt ; that is, if he be an upright, honest man. Even good marriage settlements have sometimes to be set aside, and relinquished to the creditors. How, then, can I be allowed to appropriate, as my own, that which the law will certainly adjudge to be yours ?—I mean as regards the furniture and general appointments of this house."

"A good deal has been settled, or as good as settled, during the last few days ; but I did not think it needful to particularise. Your father and your elder brothers are more than willing to become the purchasers of such things as you shall see fit to take with you from Oakenshaw. Your mother will buy, for *myself*, the portraits of my parents which hang in the dining-room below ; also two or three heirlooms, which have been in the family—handed down from father to son—for three or four generations. There would be a good deal of difficulty about the marriage settlements, even if we desired to hold by them, for it might be proved that 'Howard Bros.' were *not* solvent at the time they were made. Of course, we had nothing to do with your Aunt Jemima's fortune—that was your own, and settled upon you before there was any question of your marriage with any person. I wish, and I earnestly desire—if that has any weight with you—that all that was settled by myself, and by my late uncle, more than seven years ago, should be relinquished, and added to the value of the '*estate*,' for the benefit of the creditors."

"I am perfectly willing ; I shall not lay claim to a shilling that is not honourably *my very own* ! Good-bye. Must you really go, Frank ?"

"I must, indeed. I have lingered far too long—I have not a minute to spare."

"Then, if you will not *say* that you forgive me, kiss

me—kiss me, dear! For who knows when we may meet again!”

And as master and mistress of beautiful Oakenshaw they met never more.

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## CHAPTER XLII.

### SUSAN SPEAKS FAITHFULLY.

“**N**O, dear! I cannot possibly do as you wish. My natural place seems to be at Clapham; but, indeed, I cannot go there; do not urge me!”

It was Queenie who spoke, and she was still at Oakenshaw, though, alas! was no longer at home there; no longer the flattered mistress of the once splendid establishment. And it was Mrs. Philip Osborne to whom she was excusing herself, Dolly having come over that morning from “The Acacias,” with the hope and the expressed intention of taking Queenie back with her to the old home.

The children were already with their grandparents, enjoying to the full the society of their little cousins. Affairs at Kensington and at Oakenshaw had taken longer to wind up than any one expected; and it was not until the cold spring days were visibly lengthening, and the new year was well on its way, that the “*sale*,” which Queenie had so greatly dreaded, actually came to pass.

Her brothers had been to see her frequently, and her father had come over to arrange with her as to the personal property which should be retained; and both James and John had attended the auction, and bought in all—and more than all—that had been mentioned by their sister. Frank was still in England, though on the very eve of departure; and he had been, according to promise, to Oakenshaw and taken leave of the wife who was to remain behind in the old country. There had been a very painful

scene between them, though there had been, also, a sort of reconciliation. Queenie was assured that she was "forgiven"; but at the same time she had been made fully to comprehend that her husband had no intention of restoring her to her old place in his affections; he would in no way avenge his wrongs, so to speak—for she confessed now that she had wronged him. He forgave her fully—at least, he said so. But he still spoke as if the separation must be final; and she could only recall that which he had spoken almost four months before: "You will remain my wife, legally, of course; but you go out of my heart, and, as far as may be, out of my life, for ever and ever! Henceforth we shall be two people, we shall go our separate ways—God help us both!"

And though her offence, so far as he knew it, was evidently condoned, it was quite clear that the breach in their married life, then made, was in no-wise to be repaired. She could not win him back; she would have no opportunity for so doing, for he was going to put the wide seas between them. If time were but given her she would prove the reality of her too tardy contrition. She would evidence an affection which could not be doubted; inflexible as he was—or as he seemed to be—she would overcome his last lingering scruples, and all should be as it had been in the days that were past, when she was his happy and well-beloved wife.

Mrs. Howard would not leave her cherished home till the very last; she remained, with no one in the house save Mrs. Forester, while the public auction was being carried on. Susan was despatched with the little girls to Clapham, Rachel and Deborah being necessarily dismissed. In two or three rooms were deposited such effects as were to be reserved on her behalf; and she herself sat in her old boudoir, surrounded by all that was left to her of her *Lares* and *Penates*, and hearing afar off the bustle and confusion that was going on above, below, and all around; for the "Sale of the Household Furniture, Plate, Linen, Musical Instruments, and General Private Effects of Frank Howard" continued for the greater part of a week.

It was all over at last! The great house was empty; the varied classes of purchasers and bidders and viewers were

gone ; the final load had disappeared through the outer gates, and only Queenie and her kind attendant were left as inhabitants of the now desolate mansion.

"But, darling, you really must be persuaded," said Mrs. Philip Osborne, when she herself was quite ready to take leave ; "you cannot stay on in these untidy, dreary rooms. Besides, you know, the place is advertised 'To be let, or sold ;' and the public will have free access to the house, and to the grounds, almost immediately ; you will not even have privacy."

"I can remain secluded in these rooms, I suppose. And people who are supposed to be probable purchasers, or renters, will only be allowed to make inspection on production of the agent's card."

"For all that, my dear, a great number of folks will be sure to disregard all restrictions, and make their way in under some pretence or other. The neighbours, especially, will only have to produce their own cards ; for, as Mrs Forester informs me, some person or persons who are supposed to have the house itself in charge, will come in either to-night or to-morrow morning. You will be exposed to countless inconveniences and disturbances, if you remain here. At home, you can be as secluded as you please ! Your own rooms are ready for you ; neither father, nor mother, nor ourselves—nor, indeed, any person—shall ever intrude on you without your express permission. Do be advised, dearest ; it is bad for you, on every account, to linger here !"

"You will think I am very obstinate, Dolly. You will say to yourself, 'Just the same self-willed Queenie as of old !' But indeed, and indeed, I feel that I cannot go back *yet* to my old home. Let me stay here, so long as I am permitted to remain—as long as Mrs. Forester is good enough to stay as my companion. I will arrange my own affairs so well that I shall be ready to leave Oakenshaw at twenty-four hours' notice. Everything will be packed and in readiness for my removal."

"Yes, dear ; but if you turn away from 'The Acacias,' where *will* you remove yourself and your belongings ? You would not choose to go into lodgings ?"

"I think not, but I am not sure. I do not feel sure about anything. I care very little as to what becomes of me, though, of course, I have my children to consider. I had thought of going to Tenby, for I know my father would place his villa at my disposal if I only hinted my desire to inhabit it. But John told me, only the other day, that his wife was thinking of taking their children there for a few weeks, in the hope that a thorough change of air would cure them of the lingering whooping-cough that had troubled them all through the winter. And I should not like to be in Rose's way, Dolly, though I daresay she would alter her plans, and withdraw in my favour; but I am beginning to see what a miserable, selfish, self-centred wretch I have been ever since I can remember. And I have resolved that I will please and gratify myself no longer at the expense of other people's well-being."

"I cannot press you to decide on Mignonette Villa, for the scheme for John's children was discussed several weeks ago. Still, I do wish you could think of some place where you would like to be awhile."

"There is a place—though I have only just thought about it. Two years ago there was a little cottage to be sold in a remote corner of the New Forest, and both Frank and I fancied it might be good for little Frankie when he wanted a change of air. We went there when we were returning from Bournemouth, and we liked the place very well; it was such soft, pure air, and the scenery was lovely. Well, it ended in my buying it. I had a few hundreds to spare just then, and as it was dirt cheap I thought it could not be a bad investment. Dr. Morrison said the air, pure as it was, would not suit our dear boy, so that idea was given up; and Frank, hearing of a tenant for Fern Cottage, let it, and I scarcely thought about the place again, though I did receive some rent once or twice; and I signed a paper that had something to do with a *lease*."

"In that case it may be impossible for you to occupy the cottage. A leaseholder has, for the time specified, all the rights of a lawful owner."

"I know. Frank explained it all to me when I gave my signature. Payments were made twice, I think, then they

came to a close ; and it ended, so far as I can remember, in the people—I have quite forgotten their name—making a bolt of it. They disappeared one moonlight night, taking with them all their household goods and agricultural implements—for they had a bit of a farm. Nothing was left, however, and we both said our tenants were a good rid-dance, and thought no more about it.”

“And is the place empty now?”

“I believe it is. It has had no regular tenant of any kind since last August or September. But there *may* be somebody in it. Frank did mention something about putting caretakers in for the winter, but I daresay it came to nothing ; for it was the beginning of all the trouble, and there has been more than enough to think of ever since. Do you suppose Philip would mind running down to see that the little house is still in its place, and free of inhabitants?”

“I can promise for Philip. He will undertake the whole business, I am certain, and if you give him authority he will see that the place is put in readiness for you.”

“If Fern Cottage were in anything like decent order I would have my belongings moved down there forthwith. And, now I come to think of it, the whole place was put in thorough repair for the late tenants before they entered into possession. It was very nicely done up, too, for the man who did the work charged ever so much ; and unless these absconding tenants have been tremendously destructive, very little must really require attending to.”

“Well, dear, Philip shall be off, if possible, to-morrow morning. You must give the exact direction of Fern Cottage, and tell me how best we can get to it, for I almost think I shall go down with him.”

And so it came to pass, that on the morrow, Dolly having, to the best of her ability, explained matters to her husband, took, in company with him, an early train from Waterloo to Brockenhurst, the nearest station which would land them *somewhere* in the neighbourhood of “Fern Cottage.”

They had no little difficulty in hiring a conveyance when they left the railroad ; and the way to their destination was both long and circuitous ; they wondered whether, after all, Holmsley, a few miles further on, was not the station at

which they should have taken the road. It was a bright March morning ; there was a good deal of verdure in the forest ; tender buds and yellow catkins were already showing in certain sheltered spots. Here and there were tufts of pale primroses ; from more than one green bank, under cover of opening blackthorn and hazel branches, arose the subtle perfume of sweet violets ; and a welcome breath of spring came softly through every glade, and from every vale and fir-crowned mount, as they drove through the long avenues of the lone wild wood.

The man who had undertaken to drive them did not know the way to Fern Cottage, though he had heard that it was "*somewheres* right in the very depths of the forest ;" and had it not been for a labourer, who was crossing one of the paths, they might have wandered long before they got on the right track and found themselves at last close upon the little homestead they were seeking. The house itself was small, but pretty ; it was, as Queenie had said, a sort of farm, standing in a small enclosure, with garden plots, half-wild lawns, an old orchard, and a little meadow beyond. There was a miniature barn, too, and a sort of rough cowshed that was half a stable, a poultry yard, a row of straw bee-hives, and, beyond all, a loose stone moss-grown wall.

Dolly and Philip found their way, at last, into the cottage ; it had been empty for some months, and was, therefore, somewhat damp and weather-stained ; but it had been put into such thorough repair, and walls and ceilings had been so well attended to, that a very short time would be sufficient to get things into order. A small expense, too, would make it a fitting residence for a lady, and Philip never dreamed of the probability of Queenie's settling herself in the heart of so lonely a solitude for any lengthened period. The Osbornes discovered that they could not well return to London that day, for they must give the necessary orders at Brockenhurst, and see that the requisite persons were set to work as speedily as possible. For both Dolly and Philip knew from long experience that their unfortunate sister, having once set her mind on this solitude, would never rest till she had made good her retreat from Oakenshaw, and established herself



and her small household at Wrenbrook; for so was that special district of the Forest named. Fern Cottage—or Fern Farm, for it was more generally known as the latter—was almost the only house in the clearing, though there was a village not so very far off, and within easy walking, though by no means within sight.

The result of Mr. and Mrs. Philip Osborne's visit was, on the whole, satisfactory. Queenie was rejoiced—as far as it was possible for her to feel any kind of joy—to know that this humble shelter was really open to her, and that she had nothing to do but to remove herself, and all that remained to her, thither, without loss of time. All were glad that she should have some sort of change; and in the present state of things, it was scarcely expedient for her to go among the friends of former days. When her spirits were a little revived, when she had somewhat rallied from the succession of shocks she had received, she would be glad to see her dear old home at Clapham again.

On a lovely April day—a day of sweet sunshine and sudden golden showers, Queenie said “Good-bye” to the stately home of her married life. Oakenshaw was not sold; but there was every prospect of its being let for a term of years. Would those who had reigned there for the last seven years ever dwell within its walls again?

Queenie's small household was very soon arranged; she was thankful, she assured Dolly, to get into such limited quarters; she was tired of vastness and the remains of departed grandeur; she longed inexpressibly for peace and solitude; she wanted to be well out of the neighbourhood where she was known so well, and where her misfortunes were almost common town-talk; and where, perhaps, some part of her miserable story was not altogether unknown.

She bore the parting from them better than Dolly had anticipated, but no one—not even her loving, devoted sister—had the least idea of the forcible restraint that Queenie had put upon herself in order to maintain the calmness and composure which she had resolved should rule those painful moments. Susan had gone down to the forest, leaving her little charges under care of “The Acacias” nurses; for she was most desirous that all at the Farm should be in perfect readiness for her mistress. But before

she went she had a last interview with her master, and she had given him to understand that by whomsoever Queenie was deserted, she would still hold herself faithful to the forsaken wife.

Susan, as we have seen, was an old and valued servant ; and she was not unaccustomed to take her master, her own *quasi*-nursling, to task, whenever she thought it her duty to give him a word in season ! She had bidden him farewell, and wished him God speed in all that he undertook in the new country to which he was going ; when suddenly she dried her tears, and turned upon him with an of severest disapproval.

“And before we part, sir,” she said, “I must speak faithfully to you ! I’ve been nigh as angry as anybody could be with the mistress ; and I’ve felt that you had as good reason as anybody could have for your serious displeasure against her ; for she was *not* as good as she might have been to my darling boy that is gone, and she set you, her lawful husband, at defiance—and no wedded wife ought to do such a sinful thing, not even if the husband is what he didn’t ought to be. And she didn’t act a mother’s part towards the little angel that the good God has called to Himself. But oh, master ! she has been bitterly punished ; she has paid the penalty of her ill-doing if ever woman did ; and I do think, and I must say it—for you are my own foster-child, tho’ now you are a man grown and married, and a parent ! And perhaps I do exceed my privilege, when I tell you that she ought to be forgiven, and all forgotten.”

“I take from you, Susan, what I would not take from any other living person. But I have forgiven my wife, I do forgive her ; and I have pressed the lips I thought would never be touched by *mine* again, in token of reconciliation. But I cannot forget.”

“In one sense, perhaps not, Master Frank ! God Almighty does not forget, I trow ; but His forgiveness is completer than yours : He pardons, and let the sin be as if it had not been, where there is true repentance.”

“He pardons, indeed ; blessed be His holy name ! But, Susan, though the sin itself is pardoned, its *consequences* remain. I believe that the punishment of sin, however it be repented of, is *inevitable* ! We have all in some way, either

in this life—or in the next, to reap the fruit of that which we have deliberately sown.”

“And I cannot say it is not so, master. No doubt it is true we get our wages, whether we will or no ; but, Master Frank, don't you think the consequences of sin—especially such sin as is against oneself—should be left to God, who alone knows the full circumstances of the case, and the force of the temptation? Take care, sir, you don't bring ‘consequences’ on yourself! You ought not to desert that poor young thing—she is no better than a spoiled child—and you knew it when you married her ; when in God's sight you took her for better and for worse. You ought not to go away from her and leave her alone and undefended in a wicked world ; you should stay at home with her, and do your best to make of her the noble woman that, with the Lord's help, she may be yet.”

“It is too late, Susan. The plans that I have laid must be carried out ; even my passage-money is paid—and as things are, I cannot afford to forfeit it. I *must* go, and do what I have to do—out there—for I scarcely know where my journey will terminate.”

“*She* does not know but what you are gone. It is six weeks and more since you took leave of her. You might have paid her one more visit—you might have given her one more farewell kiss, to bear in mind all the dreary time you are away.”

“I thought it best for her sake, as for my own, not to renew the pain of parting. I am glad to think you will be with her, Susan—you will take good care of her, I am assured.”

“I shan't say you are still in England ; she thinks you sailed last month, at latest. But have not you a bit of message for her, as to the time she may expect you back?”

“I do not know myself—I may be months—I may be years, away!”

“And you will write to her—for certain?”

“I will write, as soon as I reach my destination—wherever that may be : I am uncertain as to the date, or the exact place. I cannot promise more. Good-bye ; God bless you, and all whom I leave in your care.”

## CHAPTER XLIII.

“BEATEN WITH MANY STRIPES.”

BY the time that the household at Wrenbrook had got comfortably settled, the spring in all its brightness and beauty was filling the forest with leaf, and flower, and song! The foliage was wonderful; blossoms of all sorts tapestried the vernal lawns that were one sheet of whiteness, variegated with wee crimson-tipped daisies, lilac ladies' smock, and the early blue-eyed germander-speedwell. The thrushes and the blackbirds sang from early morning till late at night; and the cuckoo's note resounded in the thick woods, at a little distance from the farm. Queenie had never really *lived* in the wild country before, Wrenbrook was far away from any bustling town; the village itself was only a tiny cluster of thatched cottages, and the nearest church was almost three miles away. There was a little gathering of Primitive Methodists, who came from far and near on Sunday mornings to join the simple service that was conducted at the Post Office, which was also the general emporium of the place. There was no butcher's shop, but a man who sold fresh meat went his rounds through all that part of the forest, twice or thrice a week, according to the season.

Dolly stayed with her sister as long as she could be spared from her own home, then Philip came for her, and together, they and their two eldest children, enjoyed the wild freedom of the beautiful forest. Philip, who thought his sister looking far from well, promised that she should return during the course of the summer, if Queenie were still content to remain in her retreat at lonely Wrenbrook; and as they were leaving, the twins extracted something very like a vow from Ermytrude and Annie to come back before the apple-blossoms had turned into ripened fruit. Also, in his own mind, he determined to suggest to Aunt Rachel a visit to the forest, which should speedily succeed theirs—now ended.

Philip was not the only one who fancied Queenie to be looking out of health; and as the sweet springtide mellowed

into early summer, it was evident to all that she was slowly failing; and she failed so much, though gradually, that one day, a little before midsummer, Susan took it upon herself to communicate with Mrs. Philip; and *hope* that Mrs. Fairfax's visit might not be delayed!—for the mistress certainly required "looking after!"

The truth was, Queenie had experienced a recurrence of the strange faintness that had first surprised her on the occasion of her final visit to Linlithgow Place. She had relapsed into insensibility more than once or twice, and there was so much difficulty in recalling her to consciousness that the faithful servant began to apprehend something really serious. She knew that Mrs. Philip herself would be precluded from replying to any summons just at present; but Mrs. Fairfax, she shrewdly imagined, was free, and would be perfectly ready to leave her own home for a longer or shorter period, as might be necessary; for Susan had long ago discovered that Mrs. Fairfax was a "woman of faculty," and one to be depended on in case of emergency.

Dolly, whose apprehensions had been aroused during her sojourn at Wrenbrook, was swift to take alarm, and lost no time in stirring up Aunt Rachel to take the journey, which Philip had already urged upon her, before the summer was any older. Mrs. Fairfax did not need much entreaty, for not one of her own family actually required her services; her sons and their wives were all well and prospering; the last baby had got over its vaccination, and its successor was not expected just yet. All the children had recovered from the measles, and the house did not require papering and painting for at least another twelve months. The settlement of Mrs. Fairfax's domestic affairs was most speedily accomplished; for everything in her little *ménage* was always in good order, and seemed to work by invisible machinery; her one maid was perfectly reliable, and so strong-minded that she had no fear of being left in the house by herself, for any length of time that might suit her mistress. So the result of a short conversation with Dolly was a modest packing, and a departure for Hampshire within twenty-four hours of the first mooted of the idea.

Aunt Rachel was in no wise averse to take a trip into the

real country, at the best season of the year, when the days were at their longest, and the foliage of the greenwood must be at its very best ! Her heart yearned, too, over the child that had always been her darling, though since her marriage Queenie had not seen a great deal of her Aunt ; but Philip spoke of her, now, and so did Dolly, as one greatly humbled, and open to many good impressions. It was long since Mrs. Fairfax had been so far south, and the scenery of the Forest was new to her, and filled her with delight. By the middle of the afternoon her pleasant journey was accomplished ; and Susan was at the station with the trim little pony chaise which Philip had insisted on as a requisite adjunct to Queenie's very modest establishment.

"Well, ma'am ! I thank the good Lord you are come !" was Susan's greeting, as she took her seat by the newly-arrived visitor, and held the reins with her well-accustomed fingers, for she had taken upon herself the easy *rôle* of charioteer, since "Jacko," the most exemplary of ponies, trotted along without a touch of the whip ; never shied, even when naughty children shouted and waved green boughs in the docile animal's face, and had not—so the female Jehu boasted—a single vice or a wicked trick ! "I was that glad when the mistress had a letter this morning that I went out and got the best dish of peas that was in all the garden, and I left the mistress hard at work arranging the lots of ripe red strawberries that the little ladies and me had been gathering in the sun. And Miss Felicia would skim the new milk herself, that Auntie might be sure of the very nicest cream ; and Miss Dorothy went hunting in the nests for new-laid eggs—for *Auntie* ! "

"And how is Mrs. Howard, Susan ? Mrs. Philip made me feel a little nervous about her ; for she says—she *faints* ! and I never knew her show the least sign of any such weakness. I have always said she does not know what it is to be really invalided ! "

"She never was ill till lately, ma'am, but now she is certainly very weak and peeky ; and her appetite is that poor, that I sometimes think she don't take enough to keep a sparrow in good health ; and she gets thinner and thinner ; though the young ladies—bless them !—are getting fatter

and fatter, and thrive wonderful ; the sweet, fresh air, and plenty of country milk, just suits them."

"Does Mrs. Howard take plenty of milk?"

"I can't say she do, ma'am. She takes plenty of *nothing*, and she wastes, and wastes, as it were, before your very eyes. It's that and these fainting fits that makes me frightened for her—as I took the liberty of writing to Mrs. Philip. She *do* want looking after, and someone should be with her that knows her constitution. And I have seen so little of her, ma'am, for I've been in the nursery ever since that angel-boy was born, and I never dreamt that she was troubled with nerves or any sort of weakness."

"What makes you think her ailment has anything to do with nerves?"

"I can't see what else it can be. She goes off all in a minute, as it were, and it's not an easy task to bring her round, I can tell you. And she is that weak, when she does come to her senses, that I am fairly at my wit's end to know what I had better do with her. There's a good doctor at Ringwood, I'm told, and I do think he ought to see her. But you'll judge for yourself, Mrs. Fairfax."

And Mrs. Fairfax could not but judge for herself when she first saw Queenie, whom she had not beheld since her last visit to "The Acacias," a full year previously. Then she was in perfect health, and seemed never to know what it was to be tired ; and the full glow of her resplendent beauty testified to her sound constitution, and to her unimpaired vigour and continuous good spirits. She was not at all prepared for the change that had passed over her brilliant niece. She was fairly startled as she held, in her own hand, Queenie's transparent white fingers, and noted the hollowness and pallor of her once rounded blooming cheeks, and the slimness of her comely bust, and the smallness of her untightened waist. She took no notice, however, at the moment, but resolved to keep a keen look-out on Regina, and to watch her closely, and as privately as possible. She soon discovered that Susan's complaint of her mistress's want of appetite was no vain lament, for she either trifled with the delicate food put before her, or turned from it with unconcealed disgust. And the general wasting seemed almost daily to be on the increase ; yet, when questioned, she

disclaimed all actual malady, and only confessed—because she could not deny it—that she was feeling always *tired*, and “so very, very seedy!”

Nearly a week had passed, and Mrs. Fairfax was not only much concerned, but extremely puzzled. Was it *consumption*? she asked herself; but Queenie had no cough, and never complained of pain in the chest, or in the side. Yet this chronic wasting *must* betoken something constitutionally amiss; this unvarying bad appetite must mean a weakness that was really alarming. On the sixth day of her visit Aunt Rachel observed that the invalid seemed quieter and paler than usual, and as she watched her toying with a few luscious strawberries that she had stooped to pick, she sank to the ground in one of her strange, unaccountable fainting fits. And the attack, whatever it was, did not yield to the usual remedies; and Mrs. Fairfax anxiously desired the attendance of medical skill, which, however, was not within immediate reach. It was really most dreadful to live so out of the world, that no doctor of any sort was certainly close at hand.

It was in the morning, just before twelve o'clock, that Mrs. Howard fainted, and it was well on in the afternoon before she was able to sit up again, or enter into regular conversation. And for the rest of the day she remained exhausted and visibly depressed. Her aunt sat with her till bedtime, and watched her closely, and was quite resolved, before she quitted her for the night, to take immediate steps for procuring proper advice.

But, of course, it was necessary to obtain Queenie's own permission before the doctor could be summoned; and that very next evening, as the two ladies sat together over their needlework, Mrs. Fairfax took courage, and entered on the question. They were sitting in the bow-window of what was called Mrs. Howard's dressing-room, a pretty, light chamber adjoining her own, and commanding a beautiful view of the clearing of the forest towards the west. Queenie had dropped her little bit of crewel-work, and was gazing out pensively on the lovely sylvan prospect before her, watching, as it seemed, the slanting sunbeams falling on the tall, straight stems of the lofty pines, and turning them into shady gold and bronze. She was looking sadly, rather than admiringly,



on the ruddy glow that fell athwart the tree-tops and the upright shafts ; and Mrs. Fairfax thought she would take the opportunity, and rouse her from her meditative reverie, which did not appear to be—or so she fancied—of a pleasurable character.

"Queenie, dear," she began, "I have been thinking about that doctor at Ringwood that Susan had been hearing of ; and I really do wish you would consult him."

"Very well, auntie ; I will see him if you really want me to ; though I do not fancy that his prescriptions will do me much good."

"You want *something* to do you good, child. I do wish you to have some medical advice. You are in a bad way ; terribly out of health, and there is no manner of doubt about it. You ought to take measures ; it is your *duty*, if only for your little children's sake. There must be a cause for these deadly faintings, and a good doctor, such as, I am assured, the man at Ringwood is, would know what is at the bottom of the attacks, and give you the exact remedy. You certainly want a good *tonic*—a pick-me-up of some sort or other. And perhaps there is some little error in your diet."

"It may be so, but I think not ; still, I might have a tonic, I suppose, something to revive me, when this deadly sort of feeling comes over me ? And yet—I don't know."

"Of course you don't know ; it is because you do *not* know, that you require proper medical advice. And you are getting out of spirits about yourself, I can clearly see !"

"I am—and I am not ! There is something wrong with me that can never be remedied, I am convinced, Aunt Rachel. The hand of death is upon me ; the awful change may be delayed—or it may come very quickly ! But come, auntie—*it will* ; I am sure of it—it is not mere fancy."

"You have an idea of the seat of the malady—if malady it may be termed—if it is, indeed, any more than utter weakness."

"Perhaps, I had better say what I believe is wrong—radically wrong ! I feel sure it is my *heart*. Something quite out of the way has happened to it ; it just seems to *die within me*, at times. At first it was simple fainting, though a very *dead* kind of fainting, I must confess. But now I feel as if I must be *dying*, when the attack comes on

and the weakness—Dr. Morrison would call it ‘prostration’—goes off less and less every time.”

“I cannot help being afraid that there *may* be serious cause for apprehension, my dear ! Still, I am sure the sooner it is relieved the better ; there are so many alarming symptoms that appear to proceed from heart-disease, and yet are due to quite other causes. Will you let me write to this gentleman at Ringwood, and name the day and hour when you can grant him the necessary interview ? Of course, some one must drive over to the station and meet him ; and Susan is fully persuaded that *Holmsley* is the nearest to our enclosure.”

“I think she is right ; and, auntie, I am convinced that I ought to take all due precautions, to use all proper means, if there are any, which, of course, the doctor will tell me. I may be deceiving myself, or I may not. I ought to know *certainly*. Ought I not ?”

“Decidedly, you ought, my child, for your children’s sake, and for Frank ! Not to speak of your own loving family at Clapham Common. The way you are treated, or even the way you treat yourself, may make all the difference to your own comfort, if not actually to life.”

“Very well then, auntie, I will do as you wish ; write as early as you will ; I don’t feel quite up to correspondence myself. I cannot make up my mind to detail my own symptoms. I am not inclined to make the doctor a diagnosis till he can examine for himself.”

“I will write to-night, dear ; directly we have the lights. We will not lose any time, now we have really made up our minds.”

“I shall be glad to know where the real danger, if any there be—actually lies. Soon after I came here, I began to feel that I was under sentence of death ; and it will be good, for divers reasons, to know the real truth.”

“Of course it will, darling ! You will be quite another creature when you understand your own case. You will recover apace, when you are certified that there is no mortal disease to be apprehended ; no veritable *organic* mischief, that may terminate fatally.”

“Yes ! It will be well to know ! And, auntie, it will not grieve me so very much, if I am told the worst. I do not want to go on living—I am tired, oh ! so very tired !”

"You are certainly very weak, dear, and you have been terribly tried during the last few months. I scarcely wonder at your being tired, but I have a good hope that you will recover your spirits in a little while, before your husband comes home!"

"I have no idea *when* Frank will come; he would fix no date whatever for his probable return. Auntie, I have lost my dear husband! He will never be really my own any more."

"Nonsense, childie! I know he was angry, and threatened temporary separation; but it will all come right again, if only you will have patience."

"Patience will be of small avail; rather, I should say, there will be no space for patience, for I shall not see him more. When he does come back I shall be *gone*—

" ' Past night, past day,  
Over the hills, and far away. ' "

"Queenie, dear, you must not give way to such dolorous forebodings. I do trust you and Frank both have many years in store, and you will be together as you were before the breach was made."

"He said I should go out of his heart, and, as far as possible, out of his life. He is only keeping his word. And whatever be my grief and pain, I deserve it all. Ah, auntie, auntie! You spoke only bare truth when you warned me that I was wasting my life. I have wasted it, wasted it thoughtlessly and recklessly, and now the end has come."

"It has not come yet, dearest, and your days may yet be prolonged. You will waste them no more, I am convinced."

"They are very few that remain, and I sometimes feel that I have scant time in which to do what I would like to do. I am not afraid to die, for I know that *free* pardon will be mine. But I do regret to die, for I have done so little with my life. So much has been given, so little, so very little, has been rendered! I have had so many opportunities, so many privileges, and I have flung them from me. I remember, Auntie, how you warned me that I should bring down upon myself heavier calamities than I had hitherto sustained. Ah, what will not be required of me!

Surely I am beaten with *many stripes* ! I have indeed made shipwreck of my life, my life that might have been so sweet, and so fair ; on the rock of my insatiate vanity ! I always knew the truth, I was taught it from my earliest childhood, but I would not heed it ! Now, indeed, I lie low in the dust, humbled and forsaken, through my own insensate folly, beaten with many stripes—*many stripes*, and sore, sore chastisement."

" Let it comfort you, my dear, to recollect that those who endure chastisement are sons and daughters. The Divine Father chastens only such. The bastards escape without punishment, while God's own children suffer needful correction for their profit, that they may be partakers of *His* holiness. Let us hope for the best in every particular, my Queenie ! God has awakened you from your sleep of sin ; your severe chastisement evidences His *love* and His forbearance."

" All my sorrow is of my own seeking ; I have well deserved the chastisement I am receiving ; I will try to take it unrepiningly."

That night Mrs. Fairfax wrote to the doctor, who was comparatively near at hand, and of whose skill she had heard so much. Two days afterwards he paid his visit. He had a long interview with his patient, and he made a careful examination. When he had ended, Queenie said, quite calmly, " There is danger, I am quite sure !"

And the doctor's answer was, " I cannot say there is *not*, madam ; the heart is much weakened ; there is something decidedly wrong. You will have to be very careful ; you must not *stoop*, and you must avoid all possible excitement. I have a medicine that may be of service to you, and you shall have it without loss of time."

Mrs. Fairfax followed him downstairs, where luncheon was laid for him. " Tell me," she said, as she replenished his plate, " is the danger imminent ?"

" So imminent, that the crisis may occur at any day, or at any hour ! I think I ought to tell you that Mrs. Howard, if she receive any kind of *shock*, may die immediately. She must be kept very quiet, and nothing that can in any way be avoided must be allowed to vex or worry her. But she ought to have better advice ; I may be mistaken, though I

think I am not ! Nevertheless, I have not devoted myself to that particular branch of study which involves cardiac disease ; I regard myself, chiefly, as a specialist, where the lungs and the respiratory organs generally are in fault. Mrs. Howard should certainly have the advice of a *cardiac* specialist—and have it without delay."

"Do you advise that she go up to town to consult some authority there ?"

"No ! the authority must come to her ; that is, if expense be not an insurmountable obstacle."

"Expense is no object. Mrs. Howard is by no means a poor person, and her father is a wealthy man ; and would, I know, spare nothing on her behalf. She is his only—I may say, his idolised daughter."

"Very well ! Then the affair is quite easy. Dr. Carden, of Russell Square, is accounted the foremost man in the profession, in cardiac diseases and maladies. His fees are heavy, that is all !"

"Their heaviness in this case is of no consequence. I will write to my brother, Mrs. Howard's father, and I know he will at once secure the advice of the specialist."

"That will be well ! I will directly send something which is generally held to be efficacious in these cases. And always keep a supply of the *best* brandy by you ; and administer a few drops if the faintness comes on. I do not believe much in alcohol as a medicine ; but if these deadly attacks supervene it is simply invaluable."

"I will write to Mrs. Howard's brother, or else to her father, by the very next post. The London specialist will doubtless be down in a day or two."



## CHAPTER XLIV.

"UNTIL THE DAY BREAK."

SEVERAL days later Mr. and Mrs. Osborne responded to Mrs. Fairfax's most urgent entreaty by making their appearance at Wrenbrook. Jonathan, who had been

greatly exercised in his mind on Queenie's behalf ever since the departure of her husband for New Zealand, was absolutely stunned when he received his sister's letter containing the fatal tidings, endorsed, as it were, by the Ringwood doctor's pronounced opinion. He lost no time in visiting Russell Square and securing the services of the well-known physician, who promised to see Mrs. Howard at the very first opportunity his manifold engagements would permit. If the diagnosis of the country doctor were in the least reliable, the case must be one that demanded immediate attention. He would be at Fern Cottage on the morning of the day after that which Jonathan and Chrissie had fixed for their journey into the Forest.

"We must go to the New Forest without delay; you must interview Dr. Carden to-day, or, at latest, to-morrow," said Chrissie, almost impatiently; "and we must set out for Wrenbrook the very next morning. Oh! my child; my poor stricken Queenie! I dreaded lest she might succumb under her husband's desertion, following upon all the calamities that have befallen her!"

"I am not quite sure, Chrissie, that we can call it 'desertion,' for I cannot quite see what other course remained open to him after all that so unhappily transpired. I am not sure that either you or I, or any of us here, are really acquainted with all the circumstances of the case but—my wife—I do lay bitter blame to myself, for I never exercised over my poor child anything like the lawful authority of a Christian parent; and I discountenanced you in the full discharge of your maternal duties. God grant that our idol do not fall a victim to our folly and weakness? Though I do confess the burden of the wrong lies chiefly on myself; you would often and often have interfered and checked the pride and self-will of our hapless daughter, had I permitted it—had I not in so many ways counteracted your wise discipline. But, do you feel yourself quite equal to the journey?"

"Yes, I do, and more than equal. If I can travel to Tenby, as I had fully decided on doing, next week, I can journey into the New Forest, which, after all, is more easily accomplished than the one resolved on. My child will need her mother, I am well assured."

"I will not seek to dissuade you ; for, kind and good as Rachel is, no one can take the place of a mother."

"In sickness—*no*. But, under other circumstances, Rachel has been both kinder and wiser than I. I have miserably failed in my duty as a true Christian mother."

"My Chrissie, do not unduly reproach yourself. I am far more bitterly to blame ; if left to yourself you would have been an infinitely more judicious parent. I have been most guilty ; it is on me that the chief *onus* of the terrible blunder rests."

"Do not let us discuss the matter, dear. I feel—oh, how sadly!—that we have both sinned against God and against our darling. I humbly pray that it be not too late to retrieve the error."

All arrangements being satisfactorily concluded with Dr. Carden, Mr. and Mrs. Osborne set out for Wrenbrook ; and Philip and Dolly were to follow presently, should it be deemed expedient. The South-Western train landed them punctually at Brockenhurst, and there was Susan, not with the pony, but with a comfortable close carriage, that was waiting to convey the travellers into the depths of the beautiful, lonely Forest.

"Thank God you are come !" was Susan's salutation, as the old woman respectfully greeted the newly-descended passengers ; "and oh ! is the famous doctor *sure* to be here to-morrow ?"

"He will be faithful to his promise, I am satisfied ; but, Susan, is she no better ?"

"She's pretty much the same. And I wasn't quite as much surprised as might have been expected ; for I've had my doubts of her these three months, and more—ever since she came to the Forest, indeed. Healthy people don't take to sudden faintings away, for which there seems to be neither rhyme nor reason."

"Has your mistress fainted since the Ringwood doctor was here ?"

"No, she haven't ; but then, it is not quite a week since he paid his visit. His medicine, too, has done her good ; she takes it the moment she feels a sinking like, or a fluttering of the heart. Its *chloric ether*, I should say, by the smell of it."

"Most probably; for it is a remedy much approved by the faculty in certain cases. And we have brought a whole case of the very finest brandy obtainable in London, as Mrs. Fairfax specially requested. If Dr. Carden should prescribe it, then it is ready to hand; though I hope and trust he may be able to suggest something more satisfactory than a mere palliative. Stimulants and sedatives do their work for the moment, but do not touch the actual seat of the disease."

"That is just what the gentleman from Ringwood said when he told us that no kind of medicine would strike to the root of the malady; but that certain drugs and the best alcohol were invaluable, as far as they went, and might probably tend to prolong life and ward off extremity in a sudden attack. We shall hear what the great London doctor has to say; for surely there are remedies that, if persevered in, effect an actual *cure*."

"We will hope that there are such, Susan! And we will take all possible care of our beloved patient, and implicitly follow out every direction that Dr. Carden may give. He is a great specialist, and if anybody in the world can save our child, he can, and will."

"The Ringwood doctor, sir, wanted to know whether heart-disease was in the family at all? I could not say, of course; but Mrs. Fairfax, she said, that she had some idea that it was."

"And she is right," said Chrissie. "My own mother died very suddenly, and the doctor said it was the heart that was affected. I was a very young girl when my mother was taken away from us, and I cannot remember accurately much that passed. But this I have not forgotten—deadly fainting fits preceded the final attack. I do not seem to have inherited the malady in any degree; though years back, when I was bringing up a family, Mr. Grahame used to caution me against over-exertion, because my heart was *weak*, not diseased, he told me; only weak—and he often assured me that people with what are commonly called 'weak hearts,' not unfrequently survived to extreme old age. He said, too, that much that was attributed to dangerous cardiac disease was really due to totally different causes—such as dyspepsia or indigestion, and the like.



I have no idea that any of my sons, or any of their children suffer from heart complaint; but I have been informed that there are certain dangerous and, for the most part, fatal diseases which commonly overleap a whole generation and reappear in the next."

When at length Fern Cottage was reached, there was Queenie, with her little daughters at her side, waiting to welcome her father and mother to her quiet forest home. She seemed to be in unwonted spirits, and greeted them with something of her old brightness.

"Oh! mother dear, how glad—how far more than glad I am to see you!" was Mrs. Howard's almost effusive exclamation when she and Chrissie found themselves alone in a low-ceiled chamber that looked out upon the distant openings of the lone greenwood. "I felt as I thought I could never feel again when Aunt Rachel had your letter yesterday to say we were to expect you to-day; and this morning there was the telegram informing us that you had really started from Waterloo. A special messenger, of course, had to be despatched from Brockenhurst to bring it, and he came over on a fleet pony not more than an hour or two ago. It was so *good* to be quite sure that you were really on the way—it was so very dear of you to come, mother!"

"My child, why did you not send for me when first you became so unwell?" asked Chrissie, gently folding the slight, fragile form in her arms. "You are sadly wasted, and all your lovely colour is gone; but I hope the very clever doctor who will be here in good time to-morrow may hit upon something that will restore you to your own brilliant self."

"I do not fancy he will; for I am almost sure that I carry within me the sentence of swiftly-coming death. Don't cry, mother darling! I am afraid I might have given you more trouble had I lived and got quite well again. I am ready and willing to die, for I do believe my Father in heaven has pardoned all my sin, and will receive me into the eternal mansions, for the dear Saviour's sake. But, ah! I do grieve that I have done so little with the full, beautiful life that was given me for *His* service; and that I have wasted—absolutely wasted! I hope—nay, I feel sure—that I shall be able to serve Him—*somehow*—in the blessed world beyond the grave."

Chrissie looked at her beloved child, and felt almost awed as she gazed on the pale, calm face, whose settled aspect told of the peace within. Queenie was indeed sadly changed as regarded the outward tabernacle; for that was visibly decaying. Heart and flesh were failing, but the immortal spirit was certainly pluming itself for its flight into the unseen. Never had she looked so sweet as now, as she stood, with a serene smile on her ashen, though still exquisitely curved, lips, and with the seal of death upon her brow. Whatever the great physician might say, her mother knew instinctively that the end of mortal life was not far distant. Her one supreme joy in that fateful hour was the thrice blessed conviction—the hallowed assurance, mercifully permitted—that the child of her heart was safe in the Everlasting Arms, and would be “not lost, but gone before.”

As for Jonathan, he had shut himself into another room, and was weeping like a child over the wreck that presented itself—of health and beauty passed for ever away. Queenie was wasted almost to attenuation; there was something that was very nearly ethereal in the slowly-moving fragile figure; but there was a soft light—a lustre, even—in the still lovely sapphire eyes, that told of the radiance that would dawn ere long.

Early in the forenoon of the next day Dr. Carden paid his appointed visit. Queenie received him in her own room, her mother and her Aunt Rachel being both present. He knew at a glance that anything approaching actual recovery was not to be looked for; nevertheless, he made a most careful examination of the case, which satisfied him that his instincts, quickened by long experience, had in no wise deceived him. The vital organ was hopelessly diseased, and the end could not be long deferred, though the natural vigour and soundness of the original *physique* might enable the action of the weakened heart to linger on for a little while—if every precaution were duly observed.

As Dr. Carden rose to bid adieu Queenie said, “Good-bye, doctor; thank you for all the pains and trouble you have taken; but I knew beforehand that not even you could save my life. Science is great, but it has its limits. They who are under sentence of death can only die—neither physician nor medicine can avail in a case like mine. You

need not be afraid to tell me anything of which you are assured—how long have I to live?"

"That, my dear lady, it is quite impossible to say; much depends upon yourself! If the action of the heart be not unduly quickened, if all disturbing causes be sedulously avoided, if syncope can be, by certain remedies, *averted*, life may certainly be prolonged—for a limited period. I do not say that health will ever again be yours, I cannot promise you actual restoration, even for a while; but, with great care and every attention, you may remain in this world a little longer."

"Thank you. It will not be very long; I will obey all your directions; I will act precisely as I am told; I will use all means; but I know I am standing on the threshold of another world, and may enter it with scarce a moment's notice. I will keep myself very quiet; but in readiness for the Master's summons."

"I thank God that it is so!" said the great specialist, solemnly and tenderly; for he was a Christian man, and he never trifled with those who were unmistakably under sentence of death; he never buoyed up the dying with earthly hopes that could not be realised. And while he read swiftly-coming death on the sweet young matron's fading face—he perceived also the reflex of the steadfast hope that cannot be ashamed.

"The Lord be with you, dear madam!" he added, as he left the room, fully conscious that he and she would meet no more on this side of the grave. "Death—come it sooner or later—is only the touch of God's finger. He touches the o'er weary heart, and it rests at His disposal."

Dr. Carden found Mr. Osborne and Susan awaiting him below. Jonathan was most anxiously expecting the physician's verdict, for he had not abandoned all hope; he could not believe but that there was something to be done!—something which should instantaneously, or, at least, certainly, arrest the progress of the awful disease itself, and restore to him his brilliant, beautiful Queenie for yet many years to come. Surely so widely celebrated, so wonderfully skilful, a man, *must* have resources at hand wherewith he might be enabled to snatch the prey from the cruel grasp of the fell destroyer! Surely, *surely*!—his darling need not

die just yet? cut down in the glory of her youth, even as a flower falls beneath the stroke of the mower's scythe? Jonathan felt at that moment as if life and death were at the disposal of the great cardiac specialist.

"Well," he cried eagerly, though tremulously—"What, after all, is your *ultimatum*? Was that Ringwood fellow wrong or right? These country practitioners are so often mistaken; they take such desponding views of any puzzling malady!"

"I regret to say that the Ringwood gentleman was not by any means in error. He formed a most just estimate of the serious aspect of Mrs. Howard's case; I cannot but endorse every item of his opinion."

"That is to say, you have no hope? No plan whereby to do battle with this subtle enemy?"

"None whatever; so far as life itself is concerned. Though I must admit that the end may not be so near as all have apprehended. She must be kept quite tranquil and undisturbed; a very slight shock might, nay, probably *would*, precipitate the catastrophe we apprehend. Where is her husband? Is he likely to return speedily?"

"Frank Howard is in New Zealand. If you know anything of the commercial world, Dr. Carden, you may have heard evil news of the fate of one of our oldest and, seemingly, most substantial firms in London! the well-known and much esteemed firm of *Howard Bros.* There has been a great failure—one of those crashes which from time to time astound mercantile circles; and my son-in-law, the nephew and supposed heir of the late head of the concern, is, of course, involved in the gigantic ruin; indeed, on his shoulders has rested the entire burden of the disaster. He has gone to New Zealand; partly in the hope of securing certain properties, and partly with the idea of establishing business relations with several houses with whom his own was intimately associated. Little doubt now remains that the creditors will ultimately receive twenty shillings in the pound! The assets are, happily, far larger than was at first supposed. All will be honourably settled, and that at no distant period, I feel well assured."

"I know of the bankruptcy of the firm you mention; but I did not know the Frank Howard of whom I had heard so

much was the husband of my interesting patient. Let me say, too, that I have heard nothing of him save that which was greatly to his credit ; his honour remains unblemished. Still, of course, the shock has been great to his wife, and may account for much that I could not otherwise comprehend. She is feeling the separation very keenly, no doubt ?"

"She feels it much ! Though, perhaps, by this time, she is getting more accustomed to the trial. The blow of his departure was certainly a heavy one ; indeed, she has never really rallied since the death of her only son."

"Was that the event, think you, that accelerated the mischief which must have been long secretly at work ? For I must tell you that the malady has been long dormant in the system, and some great and sudden shock has simply developed the evil. Was the child's death at all unexpected ?"

"No !" said Susan, a little bluntly ; "the dear little fellow was ailing almost from his birth, and I had the sole charge of him. Mistress was, unfortunately, away from home on the night of his death ; she returned to find that all was over. The real shock that did all the mischief came afterwards, I should say."

"Susan !" interposed Mr. Osborne, "go and keep guard upstairs, please, and ask Mrs. Fairfax to join us below."

"For," as Jonathan privately argued, "Queenie has confided the whole story, whatever it may be, to her aunt ; and I think one should treat one's doctor and one's solicitor with most perfect confidence. Besides, Rachel is a singularly discreet woman, and knows what should be said and what should be left unsaid under any circumstances. Rachel is more judicious even than my Chrissie."

In about three minutes Mrs. Fairfax appeared, and her brother said to her : "Do you mind telling us the exact nature of the shock that our dear Queenie got some time last November ? It might make some difference in the treatment, if our good friend here knew precisely what transpired."

"It might, but I think not. It is too late to speak of aught curative ; I should say caution and alleviation are all that remain to us."

"All that remain ;" responded Dr. Carden. "My dictum

would have to rest unaltered, were the whole history of the 'shock'—which might have been of quite a private nature—laid open before me. There has been a shock, probably followed by the first fainting-fit my patient experienced, that is quite sufficient ; details in this particular case are of little or no importance."

"That is very nearly what I supposed, doctor," rejoined Mrs. Fairfax. "There are private circumstances connected with that earliest attack, of which, as far as I know, I alone am cognisant. It is enough to say that Mrs. Howard—who is by no means of a milk-and-water temperament—overheard, by sheer accident, that which unmistakably disclosed the utter perfidy of one in whom she had, perhaps, foolishly trusted as a true friend. She *fainted* under the terrible revelation, and her swoon was long and terrible. Other troubles followed, loss of fortune, loss of everything ! And, after a while, the attacks of utter unconsciousness recurred, especially after her arrival at this place."

"No further explanation is needful ; the main facts are all that it can be requisite to know. And now I am afraid, I am positive, indeed, that no anterior information can make the slightest difference. The mischief was done, and done irretrievably, months ago ; all that is now left is to insist—as far as in us lies—upon perfect repose of body and o mind. Be on your guard against even the most trifling form of disturbance ; humour her in every particular ; shut out, as far as is possible, all sources of inquietude, all excitement, all agitation !"

"You may be sure—we, Mrs. Howard's nearest and dearest—except, indeed, her husband—who is on the other side of the world—will use every precaution ! But—for how long a time do you imagine life may be prolonged ?"

"It is just what I cannot answer ; for so much—everything, indeed, humanly speaking—depends on herself, and on those about her. If things go favourably, the end may be—*not yet*. My patient may live for several months ; may perhaps see the commencement of the winter. If the reverse occur—if aught *unfavourable* unexpectedly transpire, or if there be actual distress of mind, from *any* cause whatever—sudden death is pretty certain to ensue. And death, when it do come, will, almost to a certainty, be quite

painless. There may be a *spasm*, of which she will remain unconscious—then, the awakening in another world!"

"And you will give no new prescription?"

"None! for you cannot do better than continue the remedies which are already in your hands. I can only charge you again and again to keep her—if you can—calmly, quietly happy! Her own sweet, tranquil state of mind renders the task a comparatively easy one. Your Ringwood doctor should perhaps see her from time to time; I could advise no better treatment than that he has suggested; and his occasional visits will not in the least alarm her, and will tend perhaps to your own ultimate satisfaction."

And after a short delay the London physician returned to his own home, and Queenie's dear ones knew too well that their last fond hope had vanished. Nothing was left to them but to smooth their darling's passage to an early tomb.

The doctor, meantime, as he was borne away from the Forest, on the return journey, murmured audibly—something to the astonishment of his fellow-passenger, who shared with him the first-class compartment,—"There is no Death. What seems so is transition!"

Queenie had several serious attacks after the visit of the famous specialist, and though consciousness was in each case restored, the period of insensibility was in no wise diminished; and the fatal symptoms, as they slowly continued to develop themselves, certainly were more and more unmistakable. July passed almost uneventfully away, save that twice or thrice a week, the Ringwood doctor sought an interview with his doomed patient; and at each visit he found her scarcely altered in any respect; only she was undoubtedly a little, a very little, weaker.

Soon glorious August weather set in, and the radiant, glowing sunshine was over all the land. The voice of the reaper was heard as the golden corn was reaped on the confines of the great Forest; and those who went far afield, beyond the glades and the green aisles of the wood, could watch the progress of the sickle, and the piling up of the ruddy sheaves, as the farmer's loaded wains toiled through the yellow stubble to the granaries that duly belonged to each busy homestead. It pleased Queenie's fancy to see something of that year's bounteous harvest; for, as she said,

with the most perfect composure, "I shall never see the autumn fields again."

Jonathan had had his own easy carriage sent down ; and many were the pleasant drives accomplished within the boundaries of the Forest and beyond ; and those golden autumn days passed peacefully away. And all the while the summer roses were weaving their latest coronals ; the tall forest trees were wearing their sombre livery of darkest green ; the purple grapes blushed under the mantling vine-leaves ; and the luscious blackberry ripened in the solitary brake ; but there was no news of Frank Howard.

His name was very often mentioned, for it was thought by all concerned that Queenie would only brood the more sadly if unbroken silence were maintained ; and the twins talked with full content of the happy days to be, when papa would cross the sea again, and join them in their woodland home. But no one ever mooted the question openly : "When shall we hear from Frank ; when is he coming back again ?" and at last, certain of the thoughtful watchers noticed that Queenie began to look anxiously and even yearningly for the first appearance of the rural postman on the mossy green sward that he must cross ere he reached the garden-gate.

One morning he was later than usual, and all who watched had quite given him up, save Queenie and the little girls, who would not quit their post at the upper windows, when at last his coming was announced. Queenie's faint colour, came and went, and both aunt and mother decided that this inevitable "watching and waiting" was bad for her ; and it had got to be a regular matutinal disappointment. Chrissie resolved that she would quietly, and as a mere matter of course, refer to the continued blank ; for it was now five months since Frank had sailed, and he had taken leave of his wife and children some weeks earlier.

"When shall we hear from Frank, I wonder ?" softly questioned Mrs. Osborne, as she laid down her spectacles and her fancy knitting. "I am beginning to feel just a little cross with him, Queenie !"

"Are you, mother ? Well, I confess I should have been more than a *little* cross with him in the olden days,—I should have been angry, and unbearably ill-tempered ; but



all is different now. I have learned the great lesson of patience. I have no doubt that Frank would write if anything were settled ; and perhaps—very likely, indeed—some letter, or letters even, have miscarried." Even Chrissie did not know that Susan had written and posted several letters, with duplicates, addressed to various places at which her master might be supposed to be detained. She had managed to procure from him, at that last interview, some idea of his *possible* route ; and she had contrived to learn the names of the different ports at which he might land. And, surely, at some of them, he would be safe to make the usual inquiries at the Post Office ! And in these communications she had not hesitated to tell him, in the plainest English, the meaning of which could neither be misunderstood nor misconstrued, that *his wife was certainly dying!*

"I did not think of that, dear," responded Chrissie ; "but I daresay you are right. No doubt we shall be hearing soon—several letters, perhaps, will be delivered at once ; or one immediately after the other."

"Just so ; I have told myself that such was the interpretation of his silence, over and over again ! It is God's will that my hasty, passionate spirit should be thus tried ! and I know that all is well. But, mother, I cannot help wishing—oh, intensely !—that I may be permitted to see my dear husband, in the flesh, once again. I want to hear his own voice, though I would try to be thankful for *only a letter!* I want to feel his hand-clasp—to look into his eyes—to leave one parting kiss upon his lips. Is it wrong to be still choosing my own way?"

"I think not, dearest ! The good Lord knows all our weaknesses—all our infirmities ; we will pray together, darling, that *He* may send your husband to your side once more ! Perhaps he will even so order events that you may spend a little time in peace together."

"It may be so ; but I do not look for it. I have sinned too deeply not to reap the consequences of my mad folly for the brief remainder of my existence. I am pardoned, freely pardoned—I am well persuaded. The full penalty of my guilt has been paid by Him upon whom my sins, and the sins of all the world, were laid ; but the seed that I have obstinately sown has to be reaped—to the end ! I shall

suffer here for my folly—my headstrong pride—my egregious vanity. But, mother dear, when I am gone, remember always that your prayers for me were answered—that the good seed you and my father and others sowed, has at last borne fruit. Your teaching has not been lost, though it seemed so long in vain. I thank the Lord that I have always, through the best of parents, and through the best of pastors, known the eternal truth. And now, I know that all is well; and that, though I must suffer according to my deserts, *He* will be with me in the hour of death, and take me away to my everlasting home.”

“I bless my God that He has been your teacher—that He has spoken peace to your soul; that He has impressed upon you the holy truths that you learned in earlier years. But, my darling, we—your dear father and myself—have not been the *best of parents*! I would we had, and then you might have been spared this bitter cup of sorrow.”

“All my sorrow I have brought upon myself. No one is to blame save my own foolish, wilful self. I do not say you were the *wisest* of parents, but only the best—the very best a misguided daughter ever had! Your sole fault was that you were too tender to your erring child—too indulgent—too generous! My dear husband, too, helped to spoil me. I should have done better with a sterner, more exacting master. But he, as well as I, have paid the price of our mistakes, and it is well that it should be paid now, here, and in the world that I, at least, have left no better than I found it. I am an unprofitable servant—a cumberer of the ground! I have wasted my life, and wasted all the rich gifts that my heavenly Father showered upon me. Perhaps in another life He will let me have some of my lost opportunities over again. I hope He will, I believe He will. For it is written that His servants shall see His face in that better and more glorious world: *and they shall serve Him*! And I do think He has taken me—rebellious and wicked as I have been—into His everlasting, ever-blessed service.”

And in a few more days, Annie Derrington came down to Wrenbrook, prepared to assist in the charge that Chrissie, and Aunt Rachel and Susan had solemnly undertaken. For it was now absolutely necessary that Mrs. Howard

should not be left alone either by day or by night. Those dreaded attacks might be expected at any moment. Dolly had been invalided for some time, and Annie had been with her, for there had been an addition to the Clapham nursery; only the little life was given but for a few short hours.

"And Dolly is getting quite strong again?" asked Queenie, on the evening of Annie's arrival. "I felt extremely anxious about her when I heard of her trouble and disappointment."

"Dolly has been doing very well, all along; though, of course, the baby's death threw her back a little. She is improving now, every day, and Philip will bring her down to the Forest as soon as Mr. Grahame deems travelling expedient."

"Ah, Annie! Dolly has been the truly favoured one, after all. I have wasted strength, health, beauty, love, and fortune; they have been thrown away upon me, and I have misused them to my own undoing, and to the pain and sorrow of those to whom, under God, I owed supremest duty. I was not kind to you, either; I did you wrong in several ways; but I know you quite forgive me?"

"I felt myself slighted in those old days—only slighted—not wronged! If there was ever aught to forgive, I freely forgive, and from the bottom of my heart."

\* \* \* \* \*

It came to pass that one of Susan's letters did reach Frank Howard on his weary travels, and the information thus received so startled and alarmed him, that he straightway threw aside every other intent; and, by the first home-bound vessel, turned his back on the New World. One glorious day, late in September, he trod the streets of his native London once again; his journey had been so favourable and the passage so short, that he had had scarcely time to fret over the enforced delay.

He reached Clapham Common in the afternoon, and inquired at once for his old nurse. There he found his worst apprehensions verified. Susan had not taken unfounded alarm, as he had tried to persuade himself was the case; his wife was still in the land of the living, so far as the home

party knew ; but any post might bring the last fatal tidings. Philip was not at "The Acacias." Dolly was resting, and it was not thought well that she should be disturbed.

In fact, Mr. Howard was so eager to resume his journey that he cared very little for interviewing anybody. He would not wait for Philip, or till Dolly was awake ; or for Mrs. Derrington—who would be back again—for she had only gone to the City quite early in the evening. He feared—now that he knew all—that he might have come *just* too late ! and the postponement of a single train might cause all the difference.

Only, Nurse warned him not to make his appearance too suddenly ; and he did think it safer to go by a later train, in the meantime telegraphing to Susan, in whose discretion he had perfect confidence.

And Susan duly received her telegram, and, with a thankful heart, hastened to take counsel with Mr. and Mrs. Osborne, and with Mrs. Fairfax. Chrissie undertook to impart the blessed news to Queenie, for the mother's heart whispered to her what she must say, and how she must say it, on this most perilous occasion.

Queenie seemed to arrive at the truth instinctively, and she only kissed her mother and said, "Thank God ! He has been merciful. He has heard my supplication ! I dreamed of my husband last night ; and something told me he would come to-day."

Several hours later—by the last train, indeed—Frank himself appeared, and was overjoyed to find that Queenie was still alive, and had reported herself as "feeling much better" during the last few days. And, as speedily as was prudent, he was in Queenie's room ; and the husband and wife, so long estranged, so sadly and widely separated, were once more united, and, as Frank fondly trusted, "Never again to part."

The next day was a very, *very* happy one. Queenie was not allowed to say much, but she lay peacefully on her couch, with her husband's hand fondly clasped in her own, and the dear, familiar arm encircling her neck ; and all was between them as it had been in the early years of their married life. *Surely* he could nurse her back to life again ! was his cherished hope, as the peaceful hours wore on, from

morn to noon, and from afternoon to night. "All would be well, now that he had come back to cherish her, as never wife was cherished before!" he whispered to those who, from time to time, came softly to her side. And Queenie smiled serenely, and owned that a new life seemed to have come to her with Frank's return; she would do her very best to recover if it were so ordered, but she thought—she was almost sure—God was calling her; and she was more than ready, more than willing, to go home to Him!

And those were the last coherent words that fell from her dear lips, for soon after midnight one of those deadly swoons, preceded, too, by spasms, overpowered her. The prescribed remedies were promptly used; but it was morning before she regained full consciousness, and then her voice had sunk to a scarcely-audible whisper. About noon she seemed inclined to slumber, and really fell asleep soon after the mid-day. Her breathing was low and faint; but she lay peacefully, and once Frank told them she was dreaming happy dreams, for there was quite a lovely smile on her parted lips.

But the smile did not exactly pass away, it lingered on the ashen face; and, after one flutter of the snowy eyelids, all was still. The fair, wasted form was motionless; the lovely sapphire eyes were closed for evermore. Regina Osborne was with God!

"She was *Fortune's Favourite* to the last!" said Aunt Rachel, as she saw her in her coffin; "she suffered no pangs of death, she breathed no sad farewells! She experienced what I have always held to be the happiest lot of mortals—*she died in her sleep!*"

They bore her loved remains back to Sheen, and laid her in the green churchyard, beside her boy. For Frank would have it so. Chrissie never rallied from the effects of her bereavement, but died about a year afterwards, and Jonathan did not long survive her. The wedded pair, so long and so closely linked in soul, were but briefly separated. All their sons, and nearly all their grandchildren, are still alive, and prospering. The twins reside with their Aunt Dolores, who, as years pass on, is more and more untrue to her ominous name; and they are brought

up with their cousins, and educated all together at "The Acacias," under the care of Annie Derrington.

Frank Howard has not married again; it is believed that he will remain a widower through life. Others whose names occur from time to time in these pages, but whose fate is of minor importance, have "gone over to the majority."

On the plain white marble cross that covers all that was mortal of Queenie, is simply inscribed:

### In Memoriam

FELICIA REGINA DOROTHEA HOWARD,

IN THE 29TH YEAR OF HER AGE.

*"Until the day break, and the shadows flee away."*

THE END.









